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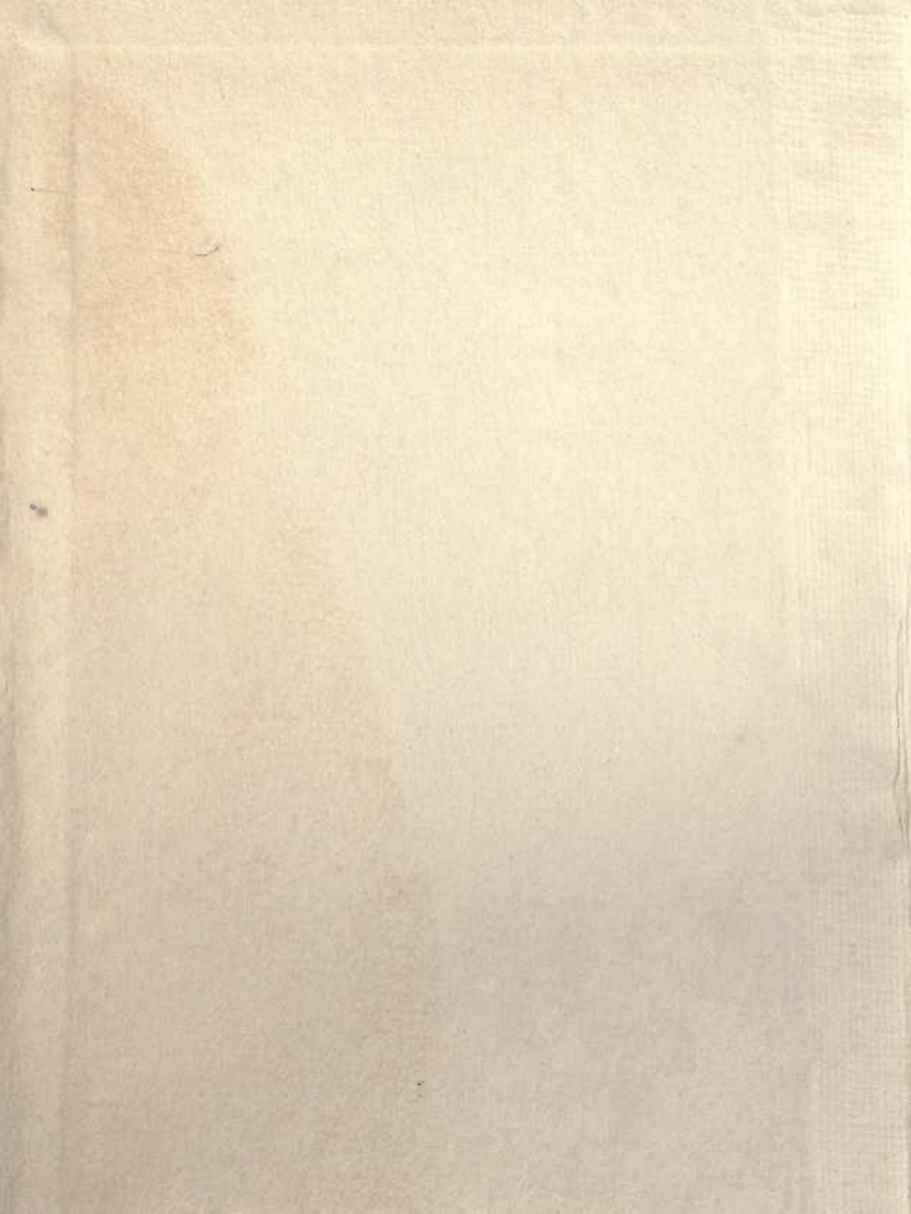
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SŒUR MARIE  
MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY





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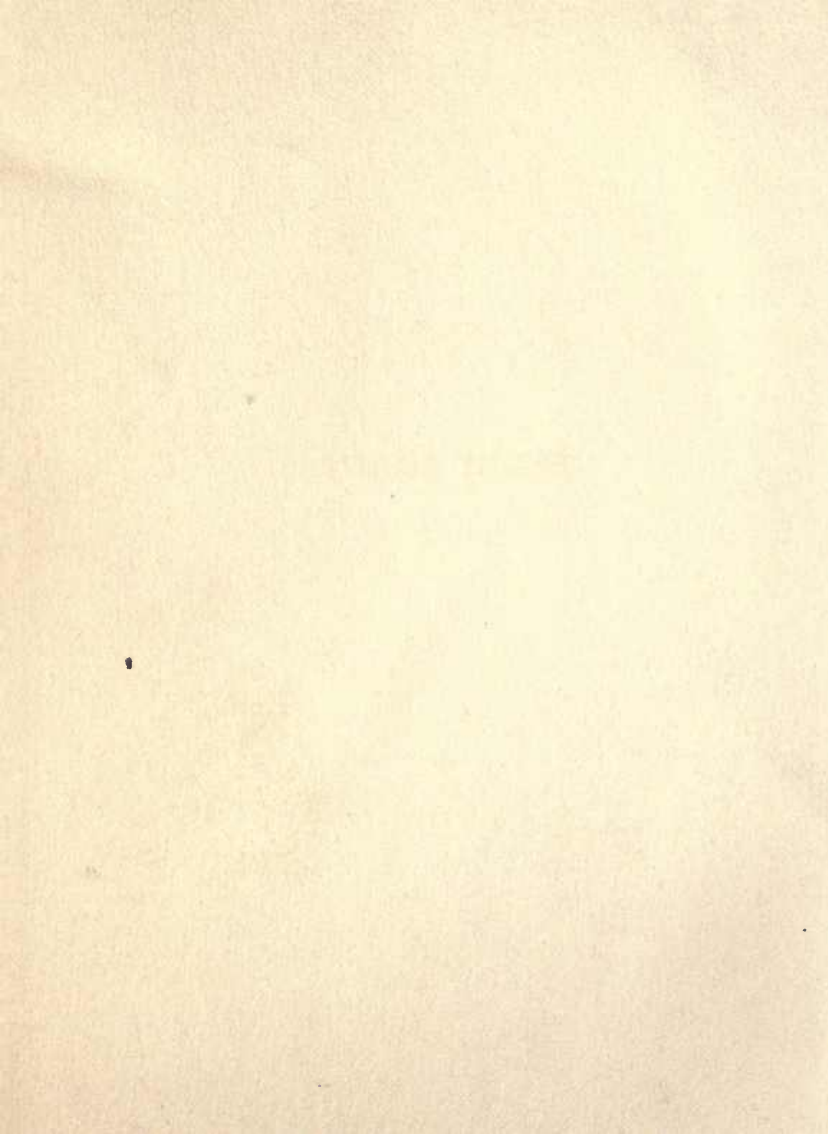
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**Sœur Marie**





SOEUR  
MARIE.

# SOEUR MARIE.

BY

MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY.

MARY  
RANDALL  
SHIPPEY.



— To the lady who  
has been, ever since she was a girl,  
kind words being her chief delight —  
from her friend Mary R. S. Shippey.



# Soeur Marie

A Poem

BY

MARY RANDALL SHIPPEY



Robert Grier Cooke

NEW YORK

MDCDIV

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## Foreword

The author of Sœur Marie has solved the problem of the soul that she sought to explain:—Eight years ago she passed from this life. The poem is an original attempt, of a woman, to give an answer to the questions of the soul. It owes little to books, but much to conversation and experience of the heart. There will be found in the poem a minor tone of music running through its lines apart from the incident and metre—who can say? Does not the soul in Earth-life, now and then, come clearly to knowledge and expression of itself? It is always insistent, but material needs engross the intellect and rarely can the soul compel recognition. A few through the ages have kept truth, some find it, and it is given when it will be received.





## Soeur Marie

I KNEW her only as a gray-garbed nun  
Whose gentle mission took her wheresoe'er  
A wearied body or grief-sickened heart  
Had need of rest and that sure healing wrought  
By her soft touch and low sweet-cadenced voice.

By what thrice-blessèd chance she came to be  
The star that fixed my life's uncertain course,  
Were briefly told:—The kindly, keen-eyed friend  
Whose ready skill to read the cause of things  
Beneath their seeming, came thro' many years  
Of ceaseless work among his suffering kind,  
Discerned my need and sent me Sœur Marie.

“A nurse for you.” So said the kind, keen eyes  
When first they saw my languid look infold  
The restful garb and quiet, tender face.  
No more it seemed a thing to question then,  
To my sick heart and thought-refusing brain,  
Than if he'd shut a rose, dew-kissed, within  
My helpless hand and said, “a flower for you.”

How many days and nights she patient watched  
Within that darkened room, I never knew ;  
For memory dates from that fair morning when  
Like one new-born, I woke to know and feel  
The something more that marked the watcher there  
From those gray shapes that peopled all my dreams.

How soft she moved with that sure poise and grace  
No art can teach but only consciousness  
Of having found the mission and the place  
By Heaven intended. So the lily moves  
On slender, swaying stem her regal head,  
Each undulating motion:—saying:—“ See  
How beautiful a thing it is to be !  
O gracious moment that conceived it meet  
That I should grow and just be fair and sweet ! ”

When from that haunted, grief-englamoured room  
First ventured I into the great clean world,—  
*My* world of arching skies and sweet new air—  
'Twere hard to tell if most I joyed or grieved.

Thro' all the long, slow, convalescing days  
Conspired the gracious ministrants of health—  
The tempered air, the smiling April sun,  
The happy birds, the little growing things  
To lure the soul back to its cage again,  
And Sœur Marie's low voice and gentle touch

Seemed but a chord the more in that full theme,  
The jubilate of the waking spring.

And ah! the deep, sweet joy to feel again  
That boundless heart—the mighty mother heart  
That knows no change, still beating warm and true;  
Within her tireless arms to lie at rest,  
A child once more; to be again caressed  
After long parting;—were that not joy?—and yet,  
Do hearts 'neath mother-kisses straight forget  
All tears and aches, or but the keener sense  
By contrast with her touch the bleeding wounds  
Fresh stabbed by hands less gentle?

Lethean-sweet

The peace and rest of those long dreamful days  
To my worn spirit. One by one the keys  
That grief had worn to wearying dissonance,  
Regained their rightful tones. My lyric soul  
Awoke to feel once more its myriad strings  
A nearing subtle, full, symphonious touch  
With nature's music. But as daily grew  
The harmony more perfect, so increased  
The one o'er-strained chord's discrepant sound,  
Grown thrice discordant where would else abound  
Fine consonance and peace inviolate.

What taught the heart that beat so evenly  
Beneath that soft gray garb, to feel the hurt

Deep hidden in another, or to trace  
With such un-erring swiftness to the cause,  
I could not then divine; so when my nurse  
Let fall one day the volume from her hands  
And clasping mine, at once began to speak  
As she had read more clearly in my look  
My inmost soul than from the printed book  
The author's thought, in my first great surprise  
I turned in half resentment from her eyes.

But not like others was my Sœur Marie,  
And stooping o'er me as an angel might  
She gently whispered, " Child, I know your pain;  
May I not know the hidden cause as well?

Forgive, if too abruptly thus aside  
I thrust the veil so closely drawn to hide  
Your aching wound; 'tis but that I may find  
Some means of swifter healing, that so keen  
I make the hurt.—Look in my eyes, dear soul,  
And read if aught has moved me thus to speak  
All uninvited, save the tender throb  
Of woman's love to woman.—Do not fear  
To let poor nature have her way; outpour  
As freely all your pent-up pain as though  
Your heart alone were listener. Dear one, know  
The power to read your suffering thus doth prove  
My right divine to share it,—right of love."



What magic lingered in her simple words  
I cannot say; but this I know, they wrought  
A mighty change within: up-rose the flood  
Of stormy feeling:—barriers builded strong  
Of stern reserve on piers of granite pride  
Were swept away. Upon that gentle breast  
I bowed my head and let the hot tears flow.  
By tender words and tactful questioning  
She won my halting, still-reluctant tongue  
To freer speech until at last was told  
The bitter story of my loss and wrong.  
Thrice bitter from such wretched commonness  
As bars its right of repetition here.

A battle lost;—an upright nature lured  
From honor and from love;—a ruined home;—  
A broken heart;—a wife's unswerving faith  
Dragged in the dust. Such scorious elements  
Have based most oft that unheroic tale,  
A woman's story, since the world begun.  
Who knows not all the sequel ere is done  
The dull prelude? Yet nothing common-place  
In its recital found my Sœur Marie.  
My watchful pride, alert to guard my hurt  
From prying, or from merely pitying eyes,  
Detected naught in her fair, speaking face  
But sweet compassion—that fine sympathy

A lofty soul feels for another soul  
Held of itself a part.

Her clasping hands  
In silent eloquence, attested oft  
How well she guessed what shafts but slightly pierced ;  
Which deepest sunk, and which had left behind  
The subtlest poison. While she listened so  
It almost seemed her own had been the hurt  
Instead of mine.

I can recall no word  
She spoke in comfort or in counsel then ;  
But when the days in passing so had made  
Familiar this new sharing of my grief  
That I no longer shrank from open speech,  
She turned one day, and in that low-keyed voice  
That made her converse seem no less a part  
Of nature's music than the tender sighs  
Soft breathed above us thro' the wind-kissed pines,  
She questioned thus:—" If it be not too great  
Presumption on the part of one who comes  
With but a recent claim upon your trust,  
May I old friendship's right so far usurp  
To ask you somewhat of your future plans? "

A moment I was dumb, so strange to me  
Her question seemed, and then I made reply :  
" I have no plans. 'Tis only those who hold

Some purpose dear who motive find for plans.  
There are, I know, some natures so endowed  
With self-igniting, deathless elements,  
That disappointment only seems to serve  
As fuel to their hope. Not so with mine:  
I staked my all and lost. Henceforth for me  
To live, is to endure as best I may  
The common lot, but not to hope or plan."

A silence fell; in dreary retrospect  
I gazed adown the changeful, stormy years  
That summed my past:—a charred and blackened  
waste  
Where straight young growths with leaf and bloom  
had been  
Flame-swept with still their promise undefined.

O bitter moment in a woman's life  
That brings the awful willingness to blot  
From memory all the sacred name of "wife"  
Evokes of joy, if so may be forgot  
The deathless grief! That moment came to me  
In that brief silence;—was its passion writ  
Upon my face? Perchance, for Sœur Marie  
Next spoke as she indeed had fathomed it.

"Dear, in your nature lie, thick-sown, the germs  
Of strength and energy; no accident

That may retard the growth, can sap the life  
Stored up within them. You are one of those  
Who, thro' a long ancestral line have come  
To rich inheritance of heart and brain:  
One rare possession,—yours by truest right  
Of self-accretion,—that fine, flexile will  
That lends itself a ready instrument  
To mighty purposes, renders you more free  
Than many be to choose and shape your life.  
To sit in passive, dumb endurance thro'  
The years that stretch from now to listless age,  
Were wanton waste thro' wilful negligence  
Of riches,—not capriciously bestowed  
By partial Providence,—but garnered up  
Atom by atom, painfully and slow,  
Thro' countless lives by countless millions lived.

You think my words too earnest,—all too grave  
The import I ascribe to one small life?  
O could you know the depth of reverence  
And awe a pure and richly dowered soul  
Can stir within me, rather would you be  
Amazed that I in such poor, common speech  
A theme so sacred dare so near approach!

In all the heights and depths of all the worlds  
Of which imagination holds conceit,  
Go find me aught whose worth and majesty

Dwarf not beside a single human soul.  
What else so vast in possibilities ;  
So broad to grasp creation's mighty plan ;  
So keen to search its subtlest secrets out ;  
So deep to sound the purposes that be  
Forever and forever fathomless ?  
And what in boundless aspiration soars  
So high to touch the God-hood it adores ?

Say not that any words these lips can frame  
Too earnest be ! Would that the gift were mine  
To thrill you with such fervid eloquence  
You could not choose but let your thought expand  
Beneath its glow, till lifting it should soar  
Above these clouds so heavy with your tears,  
And in the bright air pulsing with the warmth  
Of God's own love should meet the holy truth  
That waits the recognition of your soul."

She ceased, and in her pure, up-lifted face  
I gazed in wonder, so transfigured seemed  
Its outlines. Thro' the wide, calm, steadfast eyes  
All luminous with feeling, softly streamed  
The white effulgence from the altar flame  
That lit the inner temple of her soul.  
Was it this light, or her impassioned words,  
Or might of both that so resistless moved  
Upon the night and chaos of my world ?



A heart too often cheated of its hope  
Is prone to guard full jealously the door  
Where promise enters. If my Sœur Marie  
Had sought, by wisest words to conjure forth  
The ghosts of such ambitions and desires  
As wrought me such disaster in their death,  
She must have failed; but something in her speech  
Struck deeper than the burnt-out strata where  
The tender germs of hope had blighted been.  
Some deep, long-buried world of consciousness  
Seemed touched and quickened till in dim array  
Came thronging forth the pictures it had stored  
Of purer aspirations, fairer hopes  
Than life as I had known it, fostered faith  
To realize and mold to living forms.

I could not voice at once the surging thoughts  
That swept my being as a tidal wave  
Rising from memory's sea; but when the ebb  
That follows fast upon the mightiest flow  
Had left me free to scan the fresh-laved shore,  
I found strange creatures,—bits of weed, and shells  
That sang a sad sea-music to my ear:—  
The songs of half-remembered long-agos.

Wild longings woke, and restless questionings  
Pressed upward to my lips, where doubtful words  
Some hint of their significance conveyed

To Sœur Marie. She gave them clearer form  
And force more definite in speech somewhat like  
this:—

“Is it so new, this thought that every soul,  
However meanly dowered, or richly graced,  
Is but the growth of ages:—that we come  
Into the world or well or ill equipped  
According to our merit, and the stage  
Of progress that as conscious beings we  
Have reached in common with the growing race?

I know how strange at first this doctrine falls  
On ears accustomed to those rock-walled creeds  
Whose thund'rous booms alarm the fleets of reason.

From childhood we unthinkingly accept  
The common teaching that each new-born soul  
Comes as a fresh creation from God's hand;  
Nor dare to question why the handiwork  
Is laid aside in so unfinished form,  
Or why such crude conceptions shadow forth  
To travesty divine imagination.

Between perverted reverence that fears,  
And indolence that shirks the fullest use  
Of human rights, we crush the insistent “Why”  
That seeks to force an entrance for the light  
Of brave research that would solution find  
For many a painful riddle in our life.

We speak of God as Justice, Truth and Love,  
Nor heed the bitter facts of every-day  
That rise in stern dispute. We see around  
Us want and woe and jealousy and strife  
And hate and fear and hardened selfishness,—  
Off-sprung from inequalities that we  
Affect a resignation to accept  
As part and purpose of an all-wise plan.

Yet who that truly thinks, or fearless looks  
At life in all its aspects, can discern  
Thro' light of human love and justice, aught  
To draw his worship toward a Being who  
Has so created and so fixed by law  
Each soul and its conditions that to strive  
Were worse than vain? 'Twould better far accord  
With what our inmost hearts can recognize  
Of love and justice, to believe that He  
Who gives us being, gives us equal chance  
To climb by divers upward-leading ways—  
That each may choose according to his will—  
To that attainment and that perfect rest  
The spirit longs for. As each human soul  
From every other differs, so no two  
The self-same path shall choose: neither shall seek  
The self-same goal. Yet each alike shall find  
Complete fulfilment of his true desire,—  
See God indeed, and know that He is good!"

Her words that found their joyous echo in  
My heart of hearts, awoke besides such doubts  
As had their root in long-familiar creeds;—  
Not all unquestioned neither yet denied.  
So thus I asked:—"How can you reconcile  
This faith in God's impartial love that gives  
An equal chance to all, with that so far  
From equal distribution of good gifts  
We see on every side? How comes it that  
These inequalities and wrongs exist  
To work such woe?"

She smiled, then gently answered:  
"Let us turn a page in nature's book, for there,  
Unspoiled by poor translation, we may read  
God's freshly written text. One summer day  
I climbed a richly wooded peak that rose  
In fair New England's range; the forest stood  
In all its native grandeur of wild growth  
Untouched by woodsman's craft; and high and wide,  
So leaf-form, tint and texture all were lost  
In deep, o'er-shadowing gloom, the towering crowns  
Were proudly reared. Yet marked I how the trunks  
Of Beeches, Poplars, Maples, even Oaks,  
For generations striving toward the sky,  
Had gained far less in girth than two decades  
Of growth in sunny freedom should achieve.

I marvelled with a sense of keenest pain

To see these scions of a kingly race  
So puny and so starved ; but wandering on  
I noted here and there a giant stem  
Wrapped in its swarthy, tattered cloak of tan,—  
The very type of rough and savage king.

At first I failed to guess the monarch's name  
So loftily he bore his shaggy head  
Amid the sombre shade ; but when anon  
An unkempt lock, down drooping from the rest,  
Betrayed him of the Hemlock's gypsy race,  
I smiled and no more wondered at the small-  
Girthed oaks and puny maples. Here the wild,  
Free Ishmael of the wood had nurture found  
Best suited to his needs, and growing strong  
And lusty in his youth, had far outstripped  
And over-topped the young patricians who  
In weakness had quailed beneath his frown.

This picture I have oft recalled and oft  
Have wondered by what chance or what design  
Of Nature's fickle will, this upstart king  
Had gained his despot sway. The sources whence  
He drew his sustenance, I recognized  
To be less deep than those the gentler race  
Stretched finer souls to feed from. Him, I knew  
Heredity's great law would yet compel  
To yield his might-won throne, and then methought,



Perchance when come the true and rightful heirs  
Into their own, that haply they shall find  
New source of strength and richer elements  
Of life because of this usurper's reign.

The fancy pleased me and I loved to think  
'Twas all in line of purpose subtly planned  
By that wise planner, Nature, whose fixed law  
Gives justice to her children. Low and high,  
Strong, weak, bad, good, the perfect and the crude,—  
Each has its turn: each sees its one glad day  
Of triumph and of conquest: knows for once  
The fulness of its power, then dies content.

Nor is this all:—beneath the outward show  
Of love impartial, lies a deeper law  
Of higher justice based on larger love:  
For when to satisfy the righteous claim  
Upon her motherhood, wise nature gives  
To those short-lived, crude, coarse, and selfish things  
She brings to being, all their greed will take,  
'Tis not to rob her dearer children, whom  
She destines for a broader, richer life  
And higher purpose. That were never love,  
And nature is most loving and most wise:  
For while the claim of each she satisfies,  
She also sees that each in living out  
To full fruition all its selfish greed

Demands of being, so shall minister  
All unawares, to other lives, and yield  
At last in full content its store of will—  
Intensified and focused by self-love—  
To energize and aid some higher life.

In great creation's fine economy  
Naught serves itself alone. The seeming foul  
Gives fuller life and beauty to the fair:  
Evil is good disguised: good knows no ultimate:  
To-day's perfection hints to-morrow's dream  
Of loftier ideals. But my theme I fear  
Has lured me further than I meant to stray  
Into that realm—to me most dear and real—  
Where bright imagination sits supreme,  
Fair queen and regal mistress of the mind.

I know you see my fancy's trend and draw  
From my most free translation vastly more  
Than lends itself to fixed forms of speech.  
Nor need I point for you the analogue:—  
As nature with her own, so even He,  
The loving power she mirrors, deals with His.  
And nothing He has fashioned can be lost,  
Forgotten, or neglected: neither let  
To taste that bitter, heart-corroding draught  
We term injustice.

When the time shall come  
For the last trial at those composite sums  
We call our lives, and we are smiling shown  
The method of their working, and the way  
We missed the rule and strangely overlooked  
Some plain, prime factors: when for us is found  
The final answer, and with other sums  
Our own we shall compare, to find that none  
Than ours was easier of solution: none more full,  
Complete and perfect in its last result;  
Then shall we know that that soul-chilling thing  
We named "injustice" nowhere findeth place  
In the true plan. Born of our mortal loves,  
Ignorance and passions, it holds no elements  
Long to survive death of the mortal in us."

A curious consciousness of some unseen  
Subjective self, responding ardently  
To all the outlined and suggested truths  
Her words conveyed, possessed me, tho' my mind  
Quite failed to clearly grasp their larger import.

No comment seemed at once appropriate,  
And with the hope indelibly to fix  
On memory's scroll the graphic imagery  
Of her unstudied speech, I silent sat,  
Till lengthening shadows warned my gentle nurse  
That my too brief, blue-vaulted day was ended.

Ere April's pledges fairly were redeemed  
In foliate May, my fast returning strength  
Permitted me to seek the scented wood  
Whose dim cathedral vistas from afar  
Had long allured. Here stood the patriarch pines,  
Those wise high-priests of Nature, set to guard  
Her old alchemic rites, and tirelessly  
To chant her changeless hymns of incantation.

Beneath their outstretched, peace-invoking hands  
For hours together, Sœur Marie and I  
Roamed in our ever-fascinating quest  
Of coyly-hiding, thickly-clustering vines  
All blossom-gemmed, Spring's sweetest harbinger,  
And then in some moss-cushioned, sunny nook  
We'd sit for quiet converse, while we culled  
Our fragrant treasure over.

Thus apart  
From all the pettiness of indoor life  
And narrowing conventions, I could come  
Somewhat in touch with that large restfulness  
That so enhanced the ever-varying charm  
And strong attractiveness that Sœur Marie's  
Whole presence breathed. This restfulness I grew,  
By my slow processes to recognize  
As largely due to her rare, subtle, keen,  
Profoundly mystic sympathy with nature.  
And yet I know there was a something else—

A something not so readily explained  
In her assured serenity and poise.  
And powerfully this subtle something drew  
And held my interest, so intangible  
And all-elusive was it to my mind's  
Most keen pursuit; nor would it let me rest  
For fast-increasing wish to analyze  
And clear-define it.

More and more each day  
Her conversation evidenced a broad,  
Unique experience of what I named—  
For lack of other term—"religious life";  
And yet so altogether genuine was she,  
So obviously original her every phrase  
And turn of speech, even her mode of thought  
And line of argument, that much was I perplexed  
To reconcile her fresh, sweet sentiments  
And wholesome ethics, with my preconceit—  
Not flattering—as touching on the views  
And canting habit of religious zealots.

I tried to think my ignorance of the ways  
And faiths of all recluses so had lent  
This halo of vague mystery I felt  
Surrounding Sœur Marie: and so dismissed  
The oft-recurring puzzle; nor perceived  
What time it fast was ripening to solution.

My undisguisèd pleasure in her speech,  
What-e'er the time or subject, naturally  
Induced from her a happy unrestraint  
And frankness of expression, thro' which I  
Was free to scan at will her inner life,  
While consciousness of spiritual poverty  
On my own part, before her opulence  
Most often kept me silent.

But one day  
Her more than common warmth and unreserve  
So startled me,—discovering as it did  
Apparent firm persuasion on her part  
Of my complete response and sympathy,—  
That I began to feel this silentness  
Had been unpardonable. A tingling sense  
Of inward shame at my unworthiness,  
And deep chagrin that she should so mistake  
My sentiments, wrought upon me. Sœur Marie  
Might even think that she had found a firm  
True proselyte, or—barring this,—at least  
A faithful sympathizer, predisposed  
To favor her peculiar creed or order.

A strong revolt from this so likely chance  
Of flagrant misconception, plus the sense  
Of all the depths and distances that yawned  
Impassable between us, quickened me



To hasty protest, and inadvertently  
Compelled the breach of that cold reticence  
That held me mute whenever spiritual  
And personal themes approached consociation.  
An opportune remark from her, at length  
Gave me the wished for opening, and then  
I stood not on the order of my speech:—  
“ But Sœur Marie, the wisdom of your words—  
Tho’ plainly I perceive for such as you,  
Yet are they not entirely wise for me.  
By widely different worlds we have been shaped,—  
Our natures tuned to wholly different keys.  
Had I in early life been taught as you,—  
Had I absorbed the creed of selflessness  
And sweet humility: been set apart  
For special service: learned the blessedness  
Of pure—unselfish striving for the good:—  
In short had education placed a goal  
For me like that which upward lures your soul,  
And all such souls as consecrate themselves  
Like you in early youth, it might not be  
Impossible that there is that within  
My inmost nature that should make of me  
A woman who like you could live the life  
And joy in living.

But think how different  
Have been my aims, my hopes and purposes.

To bring the fragments of a nature wrecked  
Upon the stormy sea of worldliness,  
And lay upon that holy altar where  
Naught but the first and best should offered be,  
Were veriest sacrilege. Ah! Sœur Marie,  
I feel the fulness of your sympathy  
And bless you for it. Still I can but know  
That there are chapters in my shipwrecked life  
You can but guess at. Shielded by your name  
And order, you perforce have haply missed  
Experience which alone can fully teach  
How hearts can feel and how completely break.

You think that I can find new ideals, hopes,  
To build myself around.—Ah! had you known  
In all your gentle life a love and loss  
Like mine, sweet friend, no need were now to  
frame

In words to you the bitter hopeless truth—  
My soul has lost the power to strive again.”

In simple honesty I longed to prove  
What soon or late my friend was doomed to find,  
That all her loving efforts had been vain.  
And in the earnestness of my desire  
To make myself and my position clear,  
I grew oblivious of Sœur Marie  
And shaped my words to fit the saintly nun.

Her utter stillness and her unresponse  
To my long speech recalled me to myself,  
When deep contrition seized me; for the face,  
Always so calm and pure, was shadowed o'er  
With such a look as moved me swift to say:—  
“Have I so hurt you? Pardon, Sœur Marie!”

She took my proffered hands and mutely bent  
Her face above them, while I remorseful sat  
Waiting for her to speak.

“Dear heart,” at last she said,  
“No need is there to crave or grant excuse.  
’Twas not your words that hurt, but memories  
Long buried, that have thrilled to life again  
And quivering agony.

I see that you,  
Mis-led by my vocation, garb and name,  
Have read me and my motives all amiss.

You asked me nothing of my past, and I  
Presumed that you had rightly guessed or heard  
Some knowledge of my order. This gray garb  
Marks me not one of that great sisterhood  
Who count themselves most blest and nearest Christ  
When closest shut from Christ’s great suffering  
world.

With no religious order, faith, or creed  
Am I identified: nor am I bound

By any code that righteous men have fixed  
As needful hedge for most of mortal kind.

In life's great school of human joy and pain  
Long years ago I took my full degree.  
I learned that good and evil, right and wrong,  
Joy, sorrow, peace and pain, are only names  
For such so infinitely varied states  
As each may only enter for himself  
And for himself define. In me was fought  
That battle where the spirit meets its last,  
Worst enemy,—the Self,—and conquering  
Or conquered, evermore must justly know  
Its weakness or its strength. The victory  
So hardly won and at such frightful cost  
That long the doubt remained if victory  
It really were,—or only truce perforce,—  
Left my spent spirit sorrowing in the dust,  
All shorn of victor's pride.

Ah! no one—none  
“Hath knowledge how much blood it costs!” and I  
Was mercifully dazed, nor fully woke  
To the keen sense of all my fearful loss  
In that fierce struggle, till within my soul  
Had dawned full knowledge of my priceless gain.

I went into the contest fettered, bound:—  
The brand of many a coward master on me.

Tradition, fear, love of the world's dear praise,  
Distrust of my own powers and doubt of God's,  
All lashed my soul and mocked its claims to freedom.  
And cruelest of all that crippled me,—  
Dragging so at my heart strings,—was the strong,  
Deep-rooted love for the dear foe I challenged.

Not mine, ah no! not mine,—such victory  
As there was gained! For when my weak heart fal-  
tered,

And must straightway have yielded, lo! an arm  
That never fails the valiant who succumbs  
Not till he must, was stretched in my defence.

When next we met,—my king of foes and all  
That horde that once through him had fettered me,  
I fearless faced them, knowing I was free.—

And now unshackled by the iron law  
Of the world's right, I take the one straight way  
My feet must follow,—be it rough or smooth  
Or lead where-e'er it may,—so I but see  
The light ahead that leads my spirit on  
To larger life and wisdom.

They who hold  
Such freedom dangerous, and strive to map  
Such various roads as *all* may safely walk  
Nor go amiss, are right and wise:—'tis true

That many—mayhap all—at some time need  
Such guidance and restriction as the learned  
In moral lore can offer and enforce.  
But here and there among the multitude  
Some soul, full sharply tried because full strong  
To stand the test, is by such trial freed  
From bondage to the common law. To such,  
The codes that one time proved such needful props,  
Become grave obstacles to further growth:

How then to pass these hurtful bounds and yet  
Hold fixed and true to each unwritten law  
They sharp define, is that grave question which  
Such souls must face and solve if they would climb  
The eternal heights of peace.

Dear, strong, brave woman,—loving, constant,  
true,—

Unwittingly *your* soul has borne the test  
Of pain's baptismal fires. You think the flames  
That scorched so deep have blasted root and germ  
Past hope of resurrection. 'Tis not so.  
The happy garden of your girlish dreams,  
So full of promise and fresh budding hopes,  
Is swept away, I grant, and nevermore  
On earth shall grow its like for you again.

But tell me, dear,—nor think I ask to pain,—  
Nor yet to judge as if I had discerned



Some fault of nature in you,—’tis as if  
My very self I questioned,—tell me then  
If in that garden there had nothing grown  
Beyond your strength to weed: that you now feel  
Were well destroyed. Could you this moment pray  
To have the whole restored? Free now to choose,  
Would you have back unchanged in anything  
Your vanished world? Your eyes have answered  
me.

That darkening shade of pain and lurking fear  
Tells all I need to know.

And yet for me  
Who hold my past,—e’en all my saddest past—  
A faithful counsellor, trusty guide and friend  
To lead me thro’ such shadow-misted ways  
As mark my untried future, it would seem  
Strange mockery indeed to bid *you* turn  
From your dead world and hasten to forget.

Forgotten merely, pain’s residuum  
Will linger and corrode beneath the scar  
That marks the outward healing; but if held  
In safe solution by humility  
And wise submission, Time’s sure alchemy  
Will so transmute pain’s crudest elements  
That only in their purest ultimate,  
Beneficent and healing, shall they rise  
To mingle with the spirit.”

The subtle, sweet,  
Compelling dominant, that ever set  
Some new chord vibrant in me, thrilling it  
To yearning, vague, elusive, wavering touch  
With something dear and distant, like the dim,  
Far, half-remembered music of a dream,  
Was in her accents. And from somewhere 'neath  
The glacier-hardened crust where stonily  
Had lain my heart, there leapt a sudden flame.

Whence came this rare white soul of womanhood  
I knew as Sœur Marie? Whence all her wisdom?  
By what privilege, vouchsafed to her beyond  
The common right of mortals, had she gained  
This certainty of knowledge, this calm peace,  
This strength, this poise, this saint's courageousness.  
That all my soul with sudden passion envied?

The questions that I framed gave little hint  
Of the fierce, strong, imperious demand  
For fuller knowledge of her that this slight  
Revelment of herself had roused within me.

"How is it then," I queried, "that you wear  
This nun's attire, and sacrifice your life  
To gentle service, seeking no return  
For all you give in lavish tenderness  
Of your heart's best, thro' these dear angel hands?—  
Sweet Sister of Compassion that you are!

With gifts like yours, the unattainable  
Of this world's goals could scarce exist, and yet  
You seem indifferent, or wholly free  
From worldly aims. Why are your hopes and dreams  
So lifted and remote from all that stirs  
The common heart and wakes it to ambition?

Since you disclaim the cloister I confess  
Myself perplexed indeed, concerning you.  
Some spiritual order sometime, surely, must  
Have nurtured you, else how come you to be  
Your dear peculiar self,—and how called Sœur  
Marie?"

"A faith and order spiritual indeed,  
Though not religious,—in the straightened sense  
Ecclesiastical,—I do acknowledge.  
'Tis true they call me 'Sœur,' and many led  
By that, my mission, and this gray attire  
To hasty inference, conclude that 'nun'  
Is my appropriate title. Ne'er-the-less  
The word's a sobriquet and hardly fitting.

You must have marked how different is my garb  
From that made so familiar to your eyes  
By pale recluses, or those gentle Sœurs  
De Merci, who like shadowy spirits strayed

From some dead planet, take their silent way  
Among us, yet not of us.

Be it far  
From my sincere intention to suggest  
Comparisons invidious; the pure  
Devoted, patient lives and countless deeds  
Of sacrifice and noiseless charity  
That stand accounted, to that faithful band  
Commands from me respect and reverence  
Most genuine and deep. And, lest fuller light  
Upon their faith and principles might shame  
A present judgment, let me not presume  
To criticise what certainly would seem  
But slavish bending to a priestly rule  
And superstitious custom in their rites,  
And curious grave-like vestments.

Be all that  
However as it may, it not concerns  
My present subject save as it may serve  
To emphasize some points of difference  
Between them and my order. Not for us  
The pale disfiguring band that straightly hides  
The noblest feature of the human face;—  
That feature where, if anywhere, God stamps  
The impress of His thought.—Neither the close-  
Wound curve-concealing wimple, nor the veil  
Do we affect, but leave each happiest grace

Of form and feature beautiful and free  
As nature modelled it. No sympathy  
Have we with those harsh creeds whose tenets teach  
The beauty of holiness but quite forget  
The holiness of beauty. We believe  
Omniscience was Omniscient still, e'en when  
It fashioned woman; so in reverence hold  
His every gift a dear and sacred trust,  
And seek in love and gratitude to know  
How we may best employ it to perfect  
His purpose in us.

Since gracious lines and curves  
And tender tints, that rest and satisfy  
The heart's dumb ache for beauty, are no less  
His holy handiwork when they enshrine  
A human soul, than when they're chaliced round  
The lily's censer, we esteem it part  
Of perfect service to keep beautiful  
And pure, his temple wherein for the day  
We call a life, at least, we're doomed to worship.—  
Nay—not doomed,—permitted rather, for 'tis fair  
And good to dwell in,—full of music too,—  
Save we ourselves wake discord in its echoes.

We must be clothed, and reasons practical  
And very far removed from sentiment  
Or thoughts fanatic, constrained us to adopt

Some quite distinctive dress. First it protects;  
Next simplifies our needs, and sets us free  
From fashion's thrall; and last, but far from least  
Of such advantages as daily use  
Confirms for this soft gray, we find it rests  
The jaded nerves whose need necessitates  
Employ of many an art to soothe and strengthen."

"And forcibly indeed can *I* attest  
The excellence in practice of that last  
Consideration. But greatly do I grudge  
This interruption and sincerely hope  
You will continue. Somehow you have roused  
An interest in my mind more eager and intense  
Than words can evidence. But I do not mean  
To question deeper than my slender claim  
To special favor warrants; and the least  
Your inclination moves you to disclose  
Shall quite suffice. Still if the privilege  
Extended me permits it, I would like  
To venture this one question:—What consists  
Or constitutes the body corporate  
Of this alluring dream of sisterhood  
That scarcely yet seems more than dream to me?  
Is it an order fixed and limited  
By local habitation and a name?

Strange as it seems no doubt, I'm not aware  
I ever heard till now of its existence.



Still I confess that scarce another mind  
Of passable attainments, harbors less  
Of accurate information which relates  
To recluse lives and orders, than my own.

When first I saw you, in the indolence  
Of mental weariness I scarcely thought  
Of *you* at all; but rested in the warmth  
Your presence shed much as the leafless stem  
Rests in the subtle aura of the spring.

Some vague association lingering  
Behind descriptions I had sometime read—  
But quite forgotten—of the good gray nuns,  
Sufficed to set at rest such flickerings  
Of curious interest concerning where  
To place you, as I doubt not must have crossed  
My languid mind; and your identity  
Once settled for me, nothing subsequent  
Chanced to disturb it.”

“And far indeed from an *uncompliment*  
Was your mistaken inference,” she rejoined  
With the rare smile lighting her countenance,  
“For all the virtues of that sisterhood  
I do revere and humbly emulate.  
I doubt me tho’ if those same blessèd saints  
Were equally self-gratulate to know

That such a hopeless heretic had passed  
As hailing from their cloister. Still perhaps,  
On second thought, their very life would lead  
To juster comprehension of the faith  
And motive of our order than we win  
From many a liberal (?) worldling.

But let me not neglect your pertinent  
And no-wise ill-timed question:—which in view  
Of the pure sentiments that prompted it  
I'm more than pleased to answer, and no fear  
That any others you may wish to ask  
Can be inapt or anything but welcome.

A habitation and a name as well  
We do possess; but still are over young  
As an established order to have earned  
Such marked distinction as would make us known  
Save to a kindred few. And since we find  
Seclusion most essential to sure growth  
We leave for those who value it such fame  
As readily accrues to whoso seeketh.

The title that we bear commemorates  
That royal woman and ill-fated queen  
Whose wrongs bear shameful witness to the codes  
That stood for manliness in ancient Persia.

Hail, noble queen! Queen always, tho' discrowned  
And broken-hearted. Honor to thy name  
Who bravely bore the censure of thy lord,  
And such humiliation as those cold,  
Despotic, scheming diplomats devised  
To heap upon thee, rather than concede  
Obedience where discourteous command  
Proved kingly grace and manly reverence lacking!

Peerless thou art forever in thy lone  
And lofty courage. First who dared obey  
Thine own unerring instincts, and thy pure  
All-womanly perception of the right,  
Tho' weighed against thy kingdom. Thou didst win  
A mightier than those despots took from thee,  
And hast bequeathed it to thy royal daughters!  
Grief is their portion: suffering and loss  
Too oft befall them: yet no precious pearl  
Of their inheritance shall ever go  
To purchase ease, nor regal circumstance,—  
Nor even thrones,—still are they always royal.

You have divined our title, and I now  
Will tell you where but little while ago  
We fixed our dwelling-place,—our "Vashti's Home."  
Ay, verily a home! For there we rest  
And work and grow by giving our heart's best  
Each unto all in ready helpfulness.

For so in little deeds and thoughts of love,  
In generous comprehension,—in the full  
Ungrudging recognition of the needs  
And claims of others,—does the spirit find  
Its sweetest source of nurture for the life  
That lifts and broadens into symmetry  
And perfect grace and fragrant blossoming.

Ah! how I wish that I might picture you  
That sunny home!—the home of purity  
And peace and happiness that every good,  
Sweet, loving woman longs for!

Do you know  
That dear, enchanted lake that bears the name  
Of old world music; resting like a babe  
In fairy cradle, shyly smiling back  
In blue-eyed wonder into smiling skies  
That bend so low above it where it lies  
Close-guarded by the soft Wisconsin hills?

Ah! you do know it! then no need to say  
The spot for our “Heimgarten” scarce could be  
More fitly chosen.

The interest that I see  
Depicted in your face must later plead  
My strong excuse for offering what may seem  
A somewhat egotistical account  
Of how this home of ours came into being.

The focal germ round which have since accrued  
Such kindred germs as faith and energy  
Have fostered into most surprising growth,  
Received its first real ray of quickening life  
From the rare friend whose well-tried sympathy  
Rings always true, and whose wise-heartedness,  
In many of my life's emergencies,  
Has proved so safe a guide and sure dependence.

Look not such wide surprise. However strong  
A woman's spirit may be, still her heart  
Must find some genial, firm-based human rock  
Less plastic than itself to rest upon,  
If her fine soul is not to free itself  
For kindlier spheres ere yet it has attained  
Full growth and ripeness in the earth garden.

'Tis fineness and not weakness, that unfits  
The fibre feminine for steady, long,  
Persistent and successful buffeting  
With the fierce winds of adverse circumstance  
In cold unsheltered places. And if God  
Had not seen fit to fashion in these times,  
*One* man of royal instincts,—nobly true  
And chivalrous of heart to comprehend  
The best in womanhood;—and given him  
A steady brain and strong and helpful hand,  
And kept him pure to speak His message thro',—

I would not now, my friend, be here with you  
To bear glad witness to the miracle.

One day—the only one my memory marks  
From a long file of days that wretchedness  
Had flattened to a dead monotony,—  
He came, as was his custom at that hour,  
And looking with that searching glance of his  
Into my eyes and holding my weak hand,  
He said, with emphasis that served to fix  
My languid interest—too inclined to roam  
From the dull theme of oft-recounted symptoms,—

‘ My friend, you’re dying of a slow disease  
That only women die of. A crisis grave—  
Perhaps fatal even—is nearing fast;  
But while I warn you, I must also say  
That we have left untried one hopeful means  
By which this dread disease may yet be baffled.’

He took swift note of my unspoken question,  
And then made haste to parry it unanswered.

‘ No, never mind the name. A name, you know,  
Is like a wingèd seed that sows itself,  
To grow in time a hundred other seeds  
Till soon we have a harvest—sometimes good,—  
More often evil, for ill things you know  
Are somehow more prolific than the good,—



If haply shorter-lived. We'll talk of how  
To fight this ill of yours by strategy;  
Then you shall name it in an epitaph  
Some day when you are happy.'

'Talk not to me,' I cried, '*of happiness!*  
You do not know how cruelly that word  
May sometimes torture!' And then that he had  
meant  
Should happen, happened; for the poor, pent heart  
So sorely over-charged with the full weight  
Of tears that would not flow, had found relief.

He did not try to stay that hurrying flood  
Of hot but healing tears, but let me weep  
Till nature could no more. Then presently,—  
With that peculiar gentleness that marks  
His simplest word or gesture,—clasped the hand  
That still was trembling from the storm, and said:—

'These tears will save you: if not quite the cure  
I had in mind, still maybe 'tis as well  
'That nature should forestall me. Now I mean  
To forestall nature.' Then his smile grew grave:—  
'Can you not give that tired heart of yours  
Relief another way, and tell me what  
Is slowly breaking it?'

E'en to this day  
I know not how it came that all that load

Of hard, humiliating sorrow I had meant  
To keep forever sealed within my lips,  
Had slip't its bounds and passed them. But I know  
That more than half its dull distracting weight  
Went with my friend when easier duties came  
To call him from my side that summer day.

You know the skill that many a stricken mind,  
Restored and whole, has cause to bless him for;  
And I'll not weary you with long account  
Of how he turned my thoughts by slow degrees  
Away from hurtful grooves, and tactfully  
Set all the misery-choked, discouraged springs  
Of sympathy again to healthful flowing.

One day his theme would be some dread disease  
That highest human skill seemed powerless  
To more than palliate;—the next perhaps  
He'd paint some scene of wretched suffering  
That need not be if but the practical  
And simple means to supplement his work  
Were at command. Here mayhap I must share  
Some bitter sorrow that the fresh-turned sod  
Must shortly cover:—there, far sadder woe  
Appealed, where ached a heart full poignantly  
For that no grave would hide its peaceless dead.

He drew me thus, unwittingly to myself,

Up by his side, where, in the searching light  
Of actual fact, these painful pictures lay  
Unsoftened by such shadows as my own  
Dark sorrow might at closer view have lent them.  
And such his generous tact, *my* threatening reefs  
Were safely rounded ere I grew aware  
What priceless lessons in the blessed art  
Of tender helpfulness and pitying love,  
And sympathy, that leads to self-forgetting,  
He in his wisdom had been teaching me.

Thro' simple gratitude I first was moved  
To study how I best could complement  
His altruistic labors: then it fell,  
As if in natural order, that ere long  
He scarcely thought to question if in straits  
He might rely on me for help and counsel.  
'Twas thus, one day when he had sought my aid  
In solving what for him had so far proved  
A baffling human problem,—while we still  
Were vainly puzzling over it,—it chanced  
That half in jest, the slender blade of thought  
That afterward attained such magnitude  
Sprang up between us.

He had grown distraught  
And paced my study floor with nervous strides,  
Unceasing back and forth, distractingly,

Until by my own nervousness compelled  
To break his absent mood, I smiling said  
‘Why this dissatisfaction, might I ask?  
Is it because the famed efficiency  
Of woman’s intuition put to test,  
Has this time proved an ignominious failure?

I know this morning’s work has poorly served  
To raise your man’s respect for what we claim  
As our peculiar feminine distinction.  
But hold your judgment, friend; give me the night  
To weigh this problem—which you can but grant  
Is very far from simple,—and by this  
To-morrow, I can safely promise you  
Your confidence restored in woman’s wit.’

My banter served its purpose, for at last  
He ceased his restless walk, regarding me  
A moment, still abstracted, ere he spoke:—

‘I plead not guilty to the ungallant  
Reflections your most hastily deduced  
Conclusions would impute,—’though I must own  
The justice of your primal observation.  
The woman’s intuition cannot fail  
Where once you have engaged the woman heart;  
And I’ve no apprehensions on the score  
Of how you mean to finally dispose  
Of my hard problem. What has caused in me

The mood you rightly named "dissatisfaction,"  
Nothing concerns your capability  
Or will have to serve my needy protégés,  
But touches on a far more vital question.

Your eyes are more than clear, your judgment sure,  
Wherever other lives' necessities  
Make dumb appeal: then wherefore should you be  
So more than blind, or else indifferent,  
To what your own starved nature mutely prays for?

I know what you would say;—you're making fair  
And steady progress toward your normal health;  
But that does not content me. What I want  
For you is nurture, sunshine, air and space,  
Such as your being urgently demands,  
For growth and free expansion.—You need a home.'

'A home?' I said, perplexed, for where we talked,  
'Mid spacious walls and soft accessories  
To ease and busy leisure, I was sure  
He knew me rightful mistress.

'Yes, a home.

He quietly repeated. 'Give the word  
Its fullest weight of Anglo-Saxon meaning.  
A home is not what merely shelters us,  
Or lends such prestige as the social world  
Accords to what helps build it. Home is where  
The heart is nourished, cultured, exercised

To the full measure and the use of all  
Its latent powers and possibilities,  
And strengthened for true service in the world.

So rich a womanhood as yours is starved,  
Repressed and warped from its symmetrical  
And full unfoldment, when it fails that close  
And constant interchange of sympathy,—  
That happy exercise of heart and brain  
In tenderness and care for weaker things—  
That constitutes the spirit of a home.

I *am* dissatisfied because for lack  
Of right environment, one glorious type  
Of strong, complete and rounded womanhood  
That might be, is not.'

'Indeed, you greatly over-

estimate

My meagre store of possibilities!'

I answered calmly and with some reserve;  
For this implied forgetting on his part  
Of what so hard and bitter fate enforced  
My present lonely life, had wounded me.  
And then my calmness suddenly gave place  
To warm, indignant protest:—

'Do you then,

In common with the most of men, believe  
That that most arduous of human tasks:  
That loftiest and holiest of all aims:



The founding on firm ground, the building sure:  
The watching, warding, keeping undefiled,  
Wholesome and holy, home and all the word  
Originally stood for:—filling it  
With life and light and music, made of joy  
And peace and purity,—you think  
Such work as this belongs alone to *woman*?  
If the best that she by single effort,  
Can achieve, when freed from clog or hindrance,  
Seems to you so far from perfect, what of that  
Most wretched semblance that so often stands  
For home when haps it that the fateful hand,  
In honor pledged to aid and further her  
In all her noblest aims and purposes,  
Proves wantonly destructive, or at best  
A hopeless drag to all her energies?

A home should be, I grant you, all the best  
That poet pen can picture or suggest.  
But never on life's canvas shall we see  
Such picture realized until in man  
Is born the knowledge and the will to do  
His honest, faithful part.—Is *born*! Ay, there  
We have the key to man's regeneration!  
She who weaves from her own subtile fibre,  
Marvellously, in ways she wots not of,  
The living calyx where a soul is caught  
And safely cradled; she whose sacred trust

None but the whitest angels up in heaven  
Dare of themselves assume,—the fashioning  
Of tender things that ever-more must bear,  
For beauty or for blemish, every least  
And lightest impress of the modeler's hand,—  
Whether it be the careful master-stroke  
Or ignorant handling,—she it is who first  
Must be set free, uplifted, purified;  
Made strong with courage, wise and nobly fit  
To wear her priceless crown of motherhood,  
Before the world can look for better men.'

'All true,' assented he, 'but will you stop  
Where thousands have, content to recognize  
A vital truth, nor seek expedients  
To make it practical? You who perceive  
So far so clearly, can you not descry  
Some means to compass what so ardently  
Your reverent spirit prays to see accomplished?  
Admit that man's regeneration waits  
On woman's spiritual emancipation, still  
The question of a better race of men  
Remains in *status quo*. Man's moral plane  
Is not so high as woman's, therefore how  
Shall he help her to rise? The only means  
To uplift woman-kind 'twould seem inheres  
In womanhood itself; nor can I see

How man can help her,—save perhaps he lends  
His strength as fulcrum to her moral lever.—  
Indeed it rather seems to me that man  
For ages past, has so contributed  
His powers to further feminine ambitions.  
How more could he advantage her? In fact,  
What is it that seditious woman needs  
Or waits for to effect her own redemption? ’

His final query, partly quizzical  
And partly earnest, piqued my woman’s pride  
To quick retort.

‘ The woman’s need,’ I said,  
‘ Is man’s need also, tho’ her wants, I grant,  
Are mainly different and something less  
Irrational—e’en tho’ savants do see fit  
To sit in judgment on her strong demands  
For ‘ higher education ’ and the right  
To free employment of her faculties  
Along self-chosen lines. I feel no call  
To argue in behalf of ‘ Woman’s Cause,’  
And only speak for all humanity  
When moved to plead for any information;—  
For man and woman make two equal halves  
To be redeemed as one or lost divided.—  
But whether the human race shall gain or lose  
Thro’ special training and unfettered use

Of woman's intellect, I hold it to be  
A question that should shame a thinking age  
To speechful silence.

The one doubtful point  
Which well may agitate the wisest heads  
Of these enlightened times, is whether yet  
The truest means to healthful discipline  
And culture of the 'genius humanus'  
Of either sex, has been exemplified  
Or e'en discovered. Humanity, poor waif,  
Scarce conscious what it misses, stands forlorn  
At Wisdom's gate and waits with patient eyes  
For its true Alma Mater to come by  
And pity its neglected orphanage.'

Our friend here took occasion to defend  
Our splendid halls of learning, pointing out  
The excellence of their methods; and, alert  
In all his masculine regard and jealousy  
For settled institutions, bade me state  
Where I could point improvement, 'ere I swept  
Our educational systems thus aside  
With all a woman's fine inconsequence.'

And thus full fairly challenged, what could I  
But summon all my wits to prove him wrong  
In thinking me a mere iconoclast?  
But hardly less than he was I surprised

At what Utopian vision sprang to life  
And vivid outline 'neath the actinic warmth  
Of my impulsive words. Never before  
Had my vague heresies resolved themselves  
To well-defined objections ; nor till now,  
My cherished dreams of some far nobler plan  
Of education than the world yet knew  
Found solid ground for near anticipation.

At first with genial tolerance, tinged perhaps  
With curiosity our friend gave ear  
To my swift flow of speech ; but presently  
His look of half-amusement changed to keen,  
Attentive interest, till, before I reached  
The climax of my optimistic dreaming,  
His interest grew and quickened into warm,  
Enthusiastic sympathy that fired  
My final utterance, and lent the thrill  
And eerie fatefulness of prophecy.

‘ That great wave,’ I concluded, ‘ preordained  
To give the world its next grand impetus  
Millennialward, needs all the conscious strength  
The race can garner up and concentrate  
To meet its swift incoming and to launch  
In safety all our priceless hopes upon it.  
Only such wisdom as the heart distils

From purity and love can generate  
This needed strength; and how to re-create  
The human heart and teach it to perform  
Its holy office, seems to me the one  
Divinely hallowèd task that worthily  
Awaits some fervent soul's full consecration.'

His eyes shone mistily:—'Who knows,' he said,  
'But you yourself are destined to fulfill  
That Heaven-appointed mission?' Then he rose  
And clasped my hand and left me gravely thoughtful.

When God maps any work for us, I'm sure  
He also maps the means to its completion;  
And ere I had admitted to my mind  
As fairly feasible, our friend's suggestion,  
He brought me plans so plainly practical  
And well thought out, that I could nothing less  
Than pledge him my sincere coöperation:—  
Tho' gravely doubting still the fittingness  
Of that unique responsibility  
His confidence so readily assigned me.

An enterprise resolved upon, with some  
Is half accomplished, and ere many months  
Had passed, our thought had taken partial shape  
In solid stone and marble. A lustrum now



Has watched the fair unfolding of that dream  
That all my life had haunted; and the deep  
Unselfish satisfaction so far reaped  
Were worth another life's probationship  
Sacrific even as Heaven required of me."

Strong as my interest was, the gentle hush  
Upon her face constrained me to repress  
My eager wish for more, till the sweet smile  
Invited me to speak; then clamorously  
A score of questions each claimed precedence.  
She answering, thus resumed:—"I hardly know  
What first suggested 'Vashti's' as the name  
Most fitting for our Home; but once it found  
Consideration with us, nothing else  
Would seem admissible. Our aim in part  
You see, was evolution of the best  
And highest qualities of womanhood,  
In such environment as would afford  
Room for their free employment in some cause  
Whose issue should requite love's labor vested.  
And such a cause we knew our final aim  
Indubitably furnished; for the hope  
Of speeding, e'er so slightly, toward the goal  
Of perfectness, one human entity,  
Seemed work that even angels might rejoice  
To have assigned them.

## Right environment

And right association we believed  
The two essential principles involved  
In youthful education: and a child  
Could not, we argued, constantly respire  
The pure and vital atmosphere we meant  
Our home should insulate, except to store  
That spiritual elixir which insures  
To good inheritance development  
Harmonious and full. The woman meant  
By Heaven's most plain intention to create  
And keep such atmosphere, is never found  
Of natural choice, outside the sheltering arms  
Of love and home. 'Tis such and only such—  
As fate has stranded and left desolate,  
Who rightly can esteem a home like ours,  
Or bring to it its grand desiderata.  
These are the Vashti's, sorrow-taught, but brave,  
Who've walked uprightly their appointed ways  
Thro' bitterness and trial, gaining thus  
The tender heart, the sweet humility,  
The patience and the dignity of soul,  
That mark them worthy of their chastening.  
We do not look for such as these where throng  
Competitors for privilege to race  
Beside the strong, hard-driven sons of Adam.  
The genius-of-the-world's most tempting lure

To man's ambition, looks the veriest toy  
To what the full-orbed woman cherisheth  
Within her heart of hearts as worth achievement.

Bereft of home and all the dear delights  
Of loving ministration; shorn of all  
Her heart had offered worship to: deprived  
Of such sweet, natural means of growth and  
grace

As motherhood, love-heralded, affords her,  
Brave, large-souled, tender Vashti! What can she  
But let her hungry heart and eager brain  
Consume themselves, except for her to found  
Some kingdom worthy of her royal sceptre?

Our home is such a kingdom; and the proud,  
Sincere devotedness and reverence  
Of her most loyal subjects, prove how wise  
And just, and love-inspiring is her reign.

Her subjects? You should see them! Nobly-  
poised,  
Sweet, gracious women, gentle girls, and rare,  
Exotic types of small humanity  
That left unhomed, are welcomed to our care.

No one can buy the right to dwell with us,  
But those we know possessed in large degree

Of woman's finest gifts, and also freed  
By circumstance from all the natural ties  
That love and duty make so sweetly binding,—  
Such we seek out and ask to hide with us;—  
At first, a while as guest, the better thus  
To judge if they can pledge the sisterhood  
Full fealty and support. And this explains  
How came our friend to ask of me,—instead  
Of one more versed in strict pathology,—  
To watch beside you while he strove to lead  
You safely past the Valley of the Shadow.”

My cheek flushed warm as suddenly I sensed  
The gaping gulf between the buoyant health  
That thrilled me now, and those numb, stricken days  
That found me Sœur Marie. And all my heart  
Throbbled in the grateful hands that silent reached  
To clasp the two that in such love had served me.

She was the first to speak, and all the warm,  
Soft tenderness of her sweet womanhood  
Caressed me in her voice:

“ Dear, will you come  
While yet the witchery of June is round it,  
And prove if too alluringly my love  
Has sketched the picture of our happy Rest?  
I own to something selfish in the wish

That you should learn to love us: for to win  
Your final full allegiance could but bring  
Great joy to me as well as gain to Vashti's.

But ev'n all this apart I greatly wish  
For your own sake that you should breathe awhile  
The subtile air of that small paradise.—  
So sure am I that such environment  
Will soon discover what vast areas lie  
Still fallow in your nature,—ay, unguessed  
By your blind self-distrust.”

The tender smile,  
So full of loving confidence, yet failed  
To exorcise that watchful demon, doubt,  
That ever kept his silent pace beside me.

“But surely,” I protested, “you have seen  
Ere this, how hopelessly my attributes  
Fall short of your high standard.  
Those eyes of yours, I know but seldom read  
Amiss in what they estimate but now,  
Believe me, your kind heart has glamoured them.”

She shook her head and smiled convincingly,  
But I went on: “If sorrow sought me out,  
'Twas not my worthiness attracted it.  
And if *per contra*, Providence saw fit  
To send it as a means of discipline,  
Most sadly it miscarried of its purpose.

In no way am I better. Such small store  
Of faith and goodness as perhaps I might  
Have once laid claim to, now is worse than nil.

Not only faith in any power that guides  
Events with justice and intelligence  
Is wholly shattered,—that I might endure  
In Stoic fashion,—but capacity  
To love my fellow-creatures:—hope, desire  
Or will to aid them:—ev'n the selfish wish  
To free my wretched self from wretchedness,  
Seems paralyzed within me. You perceive  
I am no Vashti,—one who 'passing thro'  
The Valley of Bacca maketh it a well.'

Your sisterhood allures me with its sweet,  
Enticing promise of secluded rest;  
But while its motives much commend themselves  
For beauty and for ethics, still I feel  
No wish to lend them personal devotion.

With this keen consciousness of how remote  
Is my real character from your conception—  
How could I silently appropriate  
Your flattering estimation; or accept  
The hospitality your generous heart  
So graciously extends to an ideal?

If, after this confession, you can still  
Accord to me unchanged your trust and friend-  
ship,



Then gratefully indeed do I consent  
To be your guest at Vashti's."

No least shade

Of doubt or disappointment crossed her brow  
Or darkened in her eyes. And her reply  
Disclosed how utterly my words had failed  
To change or move her:—

"Sometimes it is given

To one whom love makes worthy of the trust,  
To read the record of a kindred spirit,—  
Its past and future, clearly as we read  
The sky at evening. Do not we discern  
From sunset colors, whispering winds, and vague  
Swift signs, elusive to the slow-winged senses,  
The kind of day that has been, and what kind  
Must of a surety follow? Not all days  
Thus openly record themselves, nor yet  
May every soul be read unerringly  
By most prophetic vision. Only when  
The ties of love and loyalty have bound  
For cycles long two kindred souls together,  
Can either give the ancient countersign  
With freedom not to fail of recognition.  
We are not strangers, even tho' this world  
Can date our meeting from but yesterday.  
*I know my friend*, and much more truly than  
She knows herself; and once more in the name

Of that dear knowledge, I entreat of you  
To let her be my guest, and nothing state  
Henceforth to me that may discredit her."

What could I say? Beneath the playfulness  
Of her last chiding words, I would but feel  
The deep sincerity to which my heart  
Instinctively responded; tho' in vain  
My reason groped for relevance in much  
The mystic tenor of her speech imported.

. . . . .  
A sheet of living sapphire, greenly girt  
By velvet hills, and densely broidered in  
With rare and variegated silken richness:  
Rough-quarried granite, and wrought marble,  
grouped  
And arched and domed and columned till they sang  
In symphony together, gleaming soft  
Thro' gray and green and umber,—tracery wrought  
By cunning forest-fingers taught of June  
A naiad flashing by in haste to hide  
Her shimmering whiteness in the shielding waters;  
And over all the sky—the soft June sky,—  
Flecked with the filmy forms of mist-born spirits.

"A dream," I thought, "a dream within a dream."  
For all this witchery of loveliness

Lay softly mirrored in the sleeping lake.  
White, classic-draped, slow-moving goddesses,  
Gay groups of children, slender, sylph-like girls,  
And cherub-featured infants, cooing soft  
To dove-eyed mother-faces, gave the scene  
Unfolded to my unprepared vision,  
A touch of Arcady, and thrilled a low,  
Long dormant chord of youthful visioning  
Half happiness, half dimly memoried pain.

O fair sequestered nook! Dear Home!

Sweet Home!

The blessed peace that broodeth over thee  
Lulled all my soul to rest; and banishing  
Its cumulous cloud of sorrows, set it free  
To rise to that pure world whose living light  
Thy silent teachings pointed. Sheltering Home!  
When I forget the hallowed mother-touch  
That soothed my infant griefs: when from my heart  
Time's hand obliterates that mother's smile:  
Then shall grow dim the blessed memory  
Of days that saw thy soft, protecting wings  
Infold my spirit while thy love transformed it!

A fortnight I had said when Sœur Marie  
First begged the stipulated week's extension;  
But summer's prime was past and winged seers  
Insistent shrilled of doom to drowsy August

Before my heart could bring itself to heed  
Claims urgently demanding my departure.

And ah, those fair, enchanted, fleeting weeks  
Purloined from puissant care! How shall I tell  
What vast eternal gain their passing wrought  
To me of life's imperishable riches?

The interested, free, unhurrying  
Activity around; the restful air  
Of large unfettered leisure to pursue  
The all-delighted aim of happy living,  
While failing not to work upon my heart  
Its subtle soothing spell no less provoked  
My critic mind to wonder. "How," I thought,  
"Can high refinement and broad culture rest  
Thus satisfied in what alone concerns  
This small, detached and introverted world?  
Is intellect so all-conformable  
That once assimilating greatness, still  
Its healthy vigor finds the minimum  
Of puerile interests not the less sufficing?"

O conceit of knowledge uniformed  
Of that pure wisdom that doth ever wear  
The garb of foolishness to worldly vision!

In after days when clearer insight dawned  
And understanding deepened, thoughts like these

Put all my soul to blush ; for he who forms  
With equal care the tiniest lichen-cup  
Or farthest world of fast-revolving light,  
No least thing nameth small, and nothing great.

An honored guest, yet unrestrained and free  
As any habitu  , I came and went,  
Among the busy, happy household bees,  
As fancy wafted me or interest led ;  
And from the calm-faced, clear-eyed Gretchen,—  
capped  
And snowy aproned—to the slender girl  
Whose every motion spoke her gentle breeding,  
I marked no mood but glad contentedness  
And eager drinking like a growing flower  
Of life's pure light and sweetness.

No one there  
Among those gracious women seemed to hold  
Superior place nor yet assumed the air  
Or accent of instructor ; nor could I  
Detect authority or servileness  
In any tone or gesture. All appeared  
As on an equal footing,—bound by laws  
Of courtesy and kindness each to serve  
The other, each unobtrusively alert  
To give her best, and tactfully accord  
Room to the least another's heart would proffer.

“Freedom,” had answered Sœur Marie, when I  
Confessed the key to this fine harmony  
An undiscovered secret; “no one here  
Claims of another e’en the slightest thing  
As due by right. From our Home lexicon  
Two jaded terms are watchfully excluded;—  
‘Duty’ and ‘obligation,’ and in their stead  
We write the one word ‘love.’”

“And do you find  
*Love* all that’s needed for the discipline  
And government of childhood?” I inquired  
With smiling skepticism.

“All” she said,  
In that low, even tone that never failed  
To carry full conviction; and my close  
And curious after-observation proved  
How justly founded was her affirmation.

Few were the hours of those soft summer days  
That even Vashti’s classic halls could lure us.  
For dark indeed must be Olympus’ frown  
To drive such nature-worshippers as we  
To flee the temple of their trusted goddess.

Each morning found us gathering ’neath the  
trees  
In eager groups for long delightful talks  
With Sœur Marie; for never day but brought



Some question baffling in its subtleties  
To our less penetrant and lucid minds,  
Yet ever simple to her pure heart-wisdom.

For even here, among these many rare  
And nobly-dowered spirits, Sœur Marie  
Still shone apart with luculent, serene,  
Unborrowed lustre, like a lonely star.  
And all adored the sweet humility  
And gentle grace that lent such genialness  
To her dear presence, for all recognized  
The rarity of soul that less of love  
Had left too fine and cold for friendship's uses.

No principle nor problem seemed to be  
Too deep for her fine sympathy to fathom;  
And watching her in this environment,  
I more and more perceived how hitherto  
I had but glimpsed her nature's varied richness.

With no less pleasure than the rest I drank  
Her fresh extempore wisdom, marvelling  
At its so fine adaption to the needs  
Of various minds and moods. But best was I  
Content when happened it that all the rest  
Found interests elsewhere; then my Sœur Marie  
And I would seek a small, steep-winding path,—  
Unfrequented by others thro' the sweet

And courteous tact that marked the preference,  
Tho' unexpressed, and held our favorite way  
As sacred to that freer conference  
Our quiet strolls permitted.—In and out  
Thro' brush and forest-tangle, up and up  
By rock and stream it wound, our little path,  
To cease abruptly where a single pine  
Had kept for decades long its lonely vigils.

Here, while a sweet, incessant, murmuring song  
Timed to the beat of waves far down below us,  
Charmed us to silent sympathy or moved  
To unreserved speech, I sometimes framed—  
And she as simply answered—questions which  
Self-consciousness might elsewhere have hindered.

The life at Vashti's more and more appealed  
To that mercurial imagination  
Which was my large but doubtful heritage;  
And judgment, always sternly vigilant  
To guard against a final full surrender,  
Oft prompted me to cynic-utterance  
Or adverse criticism;—all of which  
My friend received with patient courtesy  
And sweet forbearance. Plainly she was sure  
The Home itself would answer finally  
The last of my objections. Always tho',  
With gracious readiness would she explain

Whatever point I chanced to commentate;—  
Regardless if I praised or deprecated.

Thus when I asked if Vashti's was the type  
Predestined, in her mind, to supersede  
The home as founded on old-fashioned lines,  
She answered:—

“No. We cannot hope to make  
*This* home quite everything a true home should be.  
The most our rosiest optimism holds  
As possible for one short life's achievement  
Is peaceful, sunny, happy garden spot  
Where every latent home-creative germ  
May be supremely cultured and increased  
For future propagation. What if some  
Be lost or prove unfruitful?—Nature saves  
Not *all* she travaileth for;—and some good seeds  
Are destined surely to disseminate  
And grow and bloom to beauty and to sweetness.

And then shall come our great and sure reward;  
For what tho' fate hath willed that we shall leave  
Our field of labor ere its full fruition?  
No heaven can hold for us such perfectness  
But that the tiniest true love-light that shines  
On earth for our increasing, shall enhance  
That heaven's transcendent glory. Such our faith—  
That living force that forms from future hopes

The present blessing,—ever saving us  
From over-anxiousness and fretting fear  
For works resultant.”

Here she touched a key  
To which no conscious chord in me responded.  
With aim to make digression and insure  
Continuance of her subject, I essayed  
This venture, somewhat curious of the issue:—

“ While such a life as this must satisfy  
Much in the many-sided woman-heart  
That home too commonly ignores or stifles,  
Does it provide for what is after all  
The paramount essential of her nature?  
For conjure as we may with natural laws,  
Their stern immutability will force  
Their final recognition; and the love,  
Supreme and single in its potency  
To bind and weld in one, two human hearts,—  
For purposes that we devoutly trust  
Are wise in measure of their mystery,—  
Is not that love the very ultimate  
Of human nature’s fundamental laws?  
And if it be, can any mode of life  
By which that law is utterly subverted,  
Conduce to that complete development  
Which seems the aim at Vashti’s? I, perchance,

Some point have lost or misinterpreted;  
But my impression is that Vashti finds  
No place in her curriculum for marriage."

"And partly you are right," she answered me,  
"For formal marriage as the world defines it  
We hold in slight esteem. Idealists  
Cannot indulge in dreams that travesty  
Their world of truth and beauty. Dreamers find  
A path to Wisdom, straight and plain, but all  
Unknown to him whose only guide is reason:  
And e'en for him who dreams, the little path  
Loseth itself straightway if he give ear  
To any voice but Truth's; and truth disowns  
The tottering structure that the world calls 'mar-  
riage.'

Yet mark me well, for marriage true and real,—  
That heaven-ordainèd hallowèd right that ope's  
The very gate of Heaven to whom it blesseth,—  
Ah! *that* we pray may come, and speedily,  
To every soul that Love hath sanctified  
To reverently receive its sacred message.

You have observed us keenly and must know  
Such women as compose our sisterhood  
Could not accept a fraction while the whole

Of human happiness were gainable.  
Nor are they such as missing life's most dear  
And natural joys, feed disappointed hearts  
On sapless sophistry that makes of love  
A false, delusive dream of bitter ending.  
With all the ardor loving children bring  
To task assigned by teacher they adore,  
We search that vast, exhaustless scroll—the word—  
Direct, divine and simple, straight from God—  
Enrolled for us between the leaves of Nature.  
No line is left obscure; nor does it fail  
To answer, somewhere, life's most intricate  
And subtle problems, to the full content  
Of most exacting mind. And this is how  
We render its plain text concerning marriage;

We would depend. It is the woman's right  
To be ensphered, protected, pioneered  
By one more fit than she, more free and strong  
To map her world; foresee its limits; clear  
The large obstructions from her path, that she  
May walk in safety and may dwell secure.  
For only in such freedom as the man,  
By virtue of his manhood may insure  
To woman, can her nature so unfold  
Its boundless sweetness and its pristine grace  
That once again this desert wilderness



Of care-encankered life shall change and bloom  
Like Paradise of old for her and him.

Man sees but dimly that great rôle that he  
By nature is assigned to fill; and she,  
The woman, more acute to feel, but still  
Less broad of vision e'en than he, and less  
Inclined to careful tracing from effect to cause,  
Resents conditions that have circumscribed  
And warped her being: strives to break the bounds  
That man has set her—limiting himself;  
And striving seeks to make that larger world  
She longs for—thus usurping that dear right  
Of man to serve her.

'Tis not woman's fault  
She thus mistakes; nor yet is man to blame  
That he discovers not at once wherein  
He so has failed to fill her soul's great need.

'Tis woman always who must point the way  
To larger life. More quick to feel than man,  
And more inclined to question what she feels,  
'Tis she who first grows restless when the world  
They both have made has served its full intent  
And holds no further room for exercise  
Of such increase of wisdom, power and strength  
As both have therein gained. It is from her  
The first command of aspiration sounds.

“ Move on ” she says ; but man is slow to heed  
Because for longer is his soul content  
With what is well ; likewise because more clear  
To him stand out the obstacles that bar  
The way to further progress. He delays,  
And if too long he hesitates and doubts,  
The woman cannot choose, for that great force  
That moves upon her, but forestall his right  
And act, howe’er mistakenly it be.

’Tis failure that most often points the way  
To full success ; and woman when she strives  
To build that great, free, sun-lit, song-filled world  
Her soul has glimpsed from some far distant  
sphere,  
Points out unconsciously by those mistakes  
She cannot see, the weakness in herself  
And in her structure. Also in so far  
As she succeeds, she proves the meed of skill  
And wisdom she has gathered. Thus the man,  
Intently watching her, is learning fast  
A threefold lesson : first, a deep respect  
For powers she proves herself possessed of ;  
Next, the possibility of shaping forth  
The living shadow of her happy dream,  
While through her daring he is quick to see  
How puny were the obstacles he feared ;

And finally, her weakness teaches him  
His glorious strength, and happier lesson still,  
Her need of him!

                    Methinks it cannot be  
So far away, the dawn of that glad day  
When man must wake to that great privilege  
That waits for him,—The building of that world  
That woman longs to beautify and grace.  
When so he wakes, 'twill be to wrest away  
The all too arduous toil from tender hands;  
And she most gratefully will yield to him  
His own true task and take her rightful place  
Close at his side.

                    “ So then,” I said, “ ’twould seem  
From all your words imply, that you agree  
But partially with certain zealous minds  
Among our would-be champions who assert  
That no distinction in potential gifts,  
Capacities or tastes or fittingness  
Inherent lies in sex? ”

                    Her gentle smile  
Grew bright with mirth—“ the strongest vantage  
                    ground  
We as a sex possess, it seems to me  
Were yielded with that claim. If nature gives  
To her strong sons peculiar attributes  
Essentially their own, to wield and use

With natural ease which woman at her best  
Can but admire and poorly emulate,  
What shall be said of *her* distinctive dower  
Of special gifts? All sentiment apart,  
And vain conceit, can honest reverence  
Refuse to grant that woman holds in trust  
As heavenly hostage for humanity,  
Imperial virtues and rare subtle gifts  
That else were sadly lacking to our race?

Where should we look if not to her for truth,  
And constancy, and patient sacrifice,  
And depth of pure devotion that can lose  
Self in some dearer self's far dearer cause,  
And glory in the loss and count it gain?  
And what were life but one long night of gloom  
Had Heaven withheld from her one sacred trust,—  
Her power of swift divinement, gift of faith  
That sees beyond the spirit-chilling fact:  
That holds to life despite the yawning grave,  
And fosters in her heart celestial dreams  
Of Love and Love's redemption,—such as man  
Can never comprehend or call his own  
Save thro' his worship of her.

What man is there—  
Full-orbed and free, a triune entity,  
With heart to feel and intellect to weigh,  
And inner eye of spirit to discern,—

What man so heaven-designed but cherisheth  
Within his heart of hearts this saving gleam  
From the lost star of truth? 'Tis woman leads,  
But man in his proud strength must go before  
To smooth the way; for so in nature, plain  
The law is writ by hand that cannot err.

Perish what will of Life's illusions; sink as may  
In Time's abyss the fragile fairy ships  
We trust our hopes to; still the wingèd fleets  
Of the Ideal shall ne'er be wholly wrecked  
Till man forget his fair immortal goal,  
And recognize no more in womanhood  
The star that shines to light his spirit thither.

The silence deepened round us while the clear  
Prophetic voice vibrated thro' and thro'  
My inmost being till I felt the light  
Of that close-verging world her eloquence  
Had barely missed unveiling to my vision.

At last I broke the spell:—"Discern you then  
Some sign that heralds this elysium's  
Divinely welcome dawning? Is there hope,  
However faint, that you and I may see  
Sweet peace and harmony evolve from all  
This dissonance and din that woman's war  
On man's most dear traditions wakes around us?"

The sweet expressive smile gave soft rebuke  
To my impatient fervor:—"They who sow  
The seed with faith in spring-time, surely they  
Shall reap the harvest; what concerns it when  
Or how or in what world the field shall ripen?"

Again that overtone of forgiveness  
That made me vaguely conscious of remote,  
Strange countries where her spirit walked, familiar,  
But out of touch with mine. With curious sense  
Of jealous loneliness I hastened now  
To exorcise the spell, and draw her thoughts  
Back to our common world.

She does not know  
That here my memory sets a gleaming stone  
To mark a cherished epoch in our friendship:  
For here it was that first I recognized  
In some small measure, what her friendship meant  
To my starved, empty life. And also here  
My soul began to dimly comprehend  
That it must *climb* if it would hope to keep  
Within the radius of her spirit's shining.

For souls like hers must seek at intervals  
Their native mountain-tops, or soon the dense  
Miasma of our lower atmosphere,  
Would force them finally from Earth that now—  
Poor in such prototypes—so ill could spare them.



But not till after-time, when larger light  
And new-born sympathies had tutored me  
In many kinds of wisdom, was this truth  
Borne in upon me. Now, averse to what  
I failed to comprehend in her remoteness,  
I questioned, with intent to bring her back  
To themes of mutual interest. She at once  
Resumed the slackened thread of colloquy:

“ No form of oath nor any least restraint  
Do we impose on our beloved disciples.  
We simply strive to show the wisest course—  
As it appears to us—at any turn  
In any single life-path; nor attempt,  
By arbitrary strictures, to compel  
In one direction all the countless roads  
Of different destinations that converge  
At any single point. Small as it is,  
Our group comprises egos so diverse  
In character and trend, so positive  
In individuation, so defined  
And all-complex that intuition needs  
Must be alert to keep the master-key  
To all the ever-varying combinations.

We give our heart's most sacred energies  
To help a soul to find the true key-note,  
Caught from the new-born stars, to which is writ  
Its grand, eternal life-theme. Once this great,

Heaven-guided work accomplished for a soul,  
Thenceforth we leave it free. For love can aid  
Only by constant shining, and nowise  
By imposition of the freest lines  
Of boundary broad intelligence can trace  
For any other life's periphery.

*We cannot know another's entire need;*  
And when we foolishly assume that knowledge  
Our best-intended efforts work but harm.  
This truth must be conceived as the initial step  
In understanding that shall show the way  
To aid unhinderingly our fellow-creatures.  
And we at Vashti's guard most watchfully  
Our speech and thought, lest we in anywise  
Precipitate or curb another's will,  
Judgment or choice;—though of necessity  
Our very atmosphere, in some degree,  
Is potent to restrain or stimulate.  
And here is where the need for watchfulness,  
Fasting and ceaseless prayer is ever urgent.  
To hold that subtle aura that surrounds  
Our spirits always pure and undefiled  
By selfish, sordid thoughts; to keep it rare  
And vitalized with true celestial fire,  
Breathed from the upper worlds; to hallow it  
By constant prayer for His inspiring love  
And blessing, that we evermore may bear

Glad health and hope to weaker souls and spirits,  
And light to gladden dreary, sunless lives,—  
Is not such aim, devotedly pursued,  
Enough to give the days,—ay, and the nights—  
Of faithful souls to unremitting labor?  
But thanks to Him who worketh while we sleep.  
'Tis not our constant diligence that counts  
For spiritual achievement, as the heart's  
Sincere, complete and perfect consecration.

To sift the heart's desire, and teach the will  
Obedience only to divine command,—  
This is our part, the rest we leave to Him."

At last my practical, plain-reasoning mind  
Began to glimpse a something tangible  
In her clear-shining, transcendental faith  
That hitherto—with shame do I confess it—  
Had seemed to me a zealot's fantasy,—  
An unsubstantial, visionary dream.

I hoped she would continue, for desire  
For deeper understanding of her creed  
Was strong within me; but apparently  
She meant not to resume, and I in doubt  
Of how to frame so unaccustomed thoughts,  
Reverted to the more familiar subject.

"In this large liberty I plainly see  
Much that befits the free intelligence

Of reason-ripe, experience-tutored women.  
But what of young, ingenuous, unformed minds,  
With all their crude, tumultuous emotions  
To understand and guide and regulate,  
While judgment still awaits Time's training hand  
Or sleeps in embryo? You suffer them,  
Unanxiously, these young, fresh-hearted girls,  
To find their own right guidance and to choose  
Their path in life while ignorant of all  
Life's mystery and meaning? "

“ Ignorance

As safely as experience can be taught  
To walk with calm, unwavering confidence  
By intuition's light. The little path  
That leads to wisdom's fountain *all* may find,—  
If sound of brain and pure of heart and motive,—  
And our young girls are early taught the secret.

Nor are they limited as you suppose,  
To our small world for range of observation.  
They come and go as freely as the birds  
That flit 'tween two dear homes and two sweet sum-  
mers.

For some have fair ancestral roofs, and hearts  
Knit by the ties of kin, as well as love,  
To fondly shelter them; such come to us  
Of natural choice, most cordially approved  
Of guardian judgment, their time of sojourning

Depending wholly on their own desires  
Or changes natural to life's arrangements.

We let no bonds, not even silken ones,  
Fetter the birds that help to make our summer.

But some—not migratory—find with us  
Their only home; and such are duly given  
The needful taste of other how and where,  
By hospitality—not patronage—  
Spontaneously and cordially extended  
By some world-denizens whose hearts are with us.

Thus you perceive that Vashti's does not aim  
To foster ignorance of aught that goes  
To round the perfect circle of a life;  
For well it knows the beauty and the worth  
Of its exhaustless stores of priceless treasure,  
Can only be enhanced by sharpened powers,  
To weigh, compare, discriminate and value.  
And when these young souls choose—thus knowingly—  
A life devoted to our sisterhood,  
We even then accept no form of pledge;  
But bid them bend a reverent-listening ear  
To hark the first small whisper that may stir  
Within the heart with faint premonishment  
Of heirship to some happier waiting kingdom.

But ah, how prayerfully we strive to teach  
The heart to *know* that voice, and not mistake



The thousand tongues that so can counterfeit  
All but its last inimitable accent!  
Love! Love! the mystic syllable that stirred  
The soul's first consciousness long ere the suns  
Evolved from chaos; Love, the immortal breath  
That quickened cold, insensate clay to feel  
And worship and reflect its Maker's image!  
Love! Love! the first and final utterance  
Of system unto system, voiceless borne  
Across the vast, abysmal, starless spaces!  
And Love, the boundless, quenchless, deathless fire  
That leaps unto its own,—world unto world,  
Life unto life:—thro' hopeless prison walls  
Of dumb, impassive clay, soul unto soul!

Ah! who hath learned to stand with mantled face  
And reverent spirit while Love passeth by  
And toucheth him, and whispereth to his heart  
The long-lost word of magic: lo, his name  
Is writ among the eternal stars, to ring  
Forever in the songs of seraphim!

How small a word! and yet methinks it holds  
The Alpha and Omega of that theme  
The soul is set to con thro' endless cycles.

When all is done, and we at last have found  
Nirvana—Bliss—Attainment—perfect Rest,  
The circle of our blessedness will be



Still filled and bounded by that little word  
That babes can lisp and spell into its signs  
For us, forever new mysterious meaning.

Then wherefore should we seek so toilsomely  
Aught else wherewith to compass this our world,  
Or wherefore strive to learn, or to impress  
On virgin hearts a word of lesser import?

Love covereth all to whoso measureth  
Its minimum of might; or consciously  
Respondeth in his spirit to the least  
Of all its myriad minor harmonies.  
And Vashti's never-ceasing suppliance craves  
Its inspiration and full quickening  
To every heart her fostering arms enshelter.  
Once so inspired and quickened know,  
The spirit's safely poised for upward flight  
Toward higher realm and purer where the soul  
No other language speaks nor comprehends  
But Love's great music.

Yearningly  
The Mother-heart at Vashti's watches o'er  
The youthful neophyte; for mother-love  
Is slow to learn that deepest travailing  
Cannot avail vicariously to save  
Another from her meed of chastening.  
And Love's unerring star doth sometimes lead

Thro' pathless deserts where the soul must die  
A thousand deaths; for Love's true mission fails  
Except it guides the ego finally,—  
Thro' hard and desperate issues tho' it be—  
Out from the land of bondage. This may be  
Not till the tight calyx of our earthlier selves  
Bursts with the birth-throes of the struggling spirit;  
Or else corrodes away in the salt sea  
Of tears and suffering. Earth-bonds hold fast  
And many a strong, colossal soul requires  
Both means of liberation ere it tastes  
The fine elixir of a hard-won freedom.

“Thy will be done!” full reverently we strive  
To teach our mother-hearts complete response  
To that supremest prayer, when cometh Love—  
Divinest courier from the courts of Heaven—  
And spiriteth away our fairest flowers  
To the great garden of experience.  
Not ours the right by smallest obstacle  
To hinder this transplanting. For God brooks  
No interference with His plans, nor grants  
To any soul the power to liberate  
Another, from fate's toils.

. . . . .

“We both were young when marriage came to us.  
Love's hand had lightly swept such surface strings.

As wake in youthful hearts a melody  
All sweet and wild. But silent and untouched  
Lay all those deeper chords whose dominants  
Base such grave themes and living symphonies  
As once evoked go on and ever on  
In full vibration, pure and deep and strong,  
To lose themselves at last in tones so fine  
No ear but Love's can catch the strains divine.

. . . . .  
. . . . .

Now looking back how plainly I perceive  
How childish and how selfish were those prayers.  
My eager, untaught heart athirst for joy,  
Hungry for knowledge, ever crying out  
For larger sense of being, richer life  
And clearer wisdom, still refused to drink  
The cup it so had prayed for:—pushed aside  
The hand that held the very food it craved,—  
And cried and clamored on. Perverse and blind,  
The hot untutored, wilful heart of youth!  
It hears no music in the minor chords  
Evoked 'neath sorrow's hand. It sees no light  
Save in the gay, glad smile of happiness,  
Nor will believe that it may find its joy  
Save by the ways of joy. In vain for me  
The food that giveth life was daily spread  
In lavish plenty. Still I prayed for bread

And starved and anguished on, I wanted back  
The glamour of that care-free morning-time.

. . . . .  
. . . . .

Sometimes the Father suffers us to walk  
A little way in some mistaken path  
We think is duty; nor will turn aside  
Our footsteps till unto the utmost tried  
Our strength deserts us and our will forsakes.  
But never purposeless are these mistakes.  
For this and this alone it seems to me  
The loving wisdom suffers them to be:  
That feeling all our weakness we may grasp  
More firm the hand that holds us in its clasp:  
That painful consciousness of erring sight  
May force us nearer to the perfect light,  
Whose rays, perchance, piercing our hearts may  
show

The lurking self that did mislead us so,—  
A self that undiscovered might become  
A power to lure us farther yet from home.  
How apt are we in our impatient moods  
To think the ways circuitous and slow  
By which we're led to wisdom needless be;  
That we a clearer light, path more direct  
Could better bear. But strangely we forget  
The winding roads and many, bramble-grown,

That leading from our hearts our feet have worn  
With wilful straying.

Till by homesickness  
And longing, pain and thirst that nothing else  
Can cure, is born the will to line a path  
Direct for home till we: grown strong and staunch  
In singleness of heart, can hew it smooth  
And strictly walk therein, nor let our feet  
Be lured aside by winding shady ways.  
'Twere all unwise our footsteps to compel  
Through paths too straitly struck. The thorns would  
tear  
And pierce us till in anguish and despair  
The lofty aspiration would be quenched:—  
The unformed soul from fostering spirit wrenched.”

She paused, and like some softly-molded sphynx  
Sat silent with that rapt, far-seeing look  
That came so oft into her deep true eyes;  
While o’er her face there stole the white high  
light  
That made her look as Beatricia might.

What heights and depths her spirit compassed  
when  
My Sœur Marie looked so, I cannot say—  
For always o’er me came a hush of awe;

And for the moment I too seemed to be  
Merged into formless truth's infinity.

. . . . .

Gently and reverently as one would lift  
The lid to gaze upon a coffined face,  
I turned those sacred leaves. O white, white leaves!  
O consecrated book! And can ye still  
Be less than breathing, sensate things, to hold  
So long shut here to silentness the cries  
Wrung from that pearl-pure heart?—And I, dear  
heart,

I dreamed that I had suffered;—blamed swift fate  
That cut me off, at one sharp, sudden stroke  
From all I loved.—How sweetly merciful!—  
I know it now. Ah! Sœur Marie, thine agony,  
Drawn thro' the length of lingering days that saw  
Thy wifely love slow-tortured to its death,  
Has taught my coward soul what mean the words  
“To suffer and be strong!”

On each brief page,  
In nervous hand, the rough staccato lines  
Were palely pencil-traced, as if they stood  
For muffled sobs, the heart they welled from meant  
Should reach no keenest ear. And as I read  
My own heart wellnigh broke, and blinding tears  
Ran down like rain as if to wash away  
The print of torturing nails and cruel spear  
That so had crucified a woman's heart.



O, pitying God! To stand thus helpless by  
And see a soul in Thine own image formed,  
Fling down Thy highest gifts beneath his feet  
And trample them as swine will trample lilies!

And can I nothing, then, impart to him  
Of strength or wisdom, or abiding wish  
To choose the better portion?

Then wherefore is love born between two souls  
To weld them close till one can know no hurt  
And not the other, if the tenuous bonds  
No force can sever, prove but ropes of sand  
When desperately we try their treacherous strength  
To draw our own aback from death or danger?

And what availeth prayer? Have I not asked  
In faith and humbleness, of thee, O Heaven,  
A boon that Love itself would sanctify  
To good ineffable? Have I craved aught  
In selfishness or worldliness of spirit?  
O Holy Father, keep thro' Thine own name,  
Those whom Thou gavest me! And from the world  
Of evil keep Thou them! So even He,  
The sinless One, did pray for His beloved.  
And wert thou dumb to Him, O Heaven, as now  
Thou art to me?

Ah! Christ, thou patient Christ!  
Thou all compassionate,—and was it thus

Thy heart—that deep, true heart, the tenderest  
That ever ached for suffering, sinful world,—  
Was hurt when Judas kist thee?  
Nay, Master, not like this, for Thou  
Could'st ne'er have loved depraved Iscariot so!

And yet they say of me that I am cold—  
Not tender, soft or warm, as women are  
Who are less strong!—Well, if to feel  
And suffer thus is to be hard and cold,  
And lacking woman's tenderness and warmth,  
Then make me, Heaven, as soft as molten wax,  
As warm as unslant ray of noonday sun,  
That when a hand again shall stab my heart,  
The cleanly-cloven parts together straight  
Shall melt, and leave no scar!

And it has come—the worst has come at last!  
Tho' I have prayed and prayed that Thou would'st  
    spare  
Me this! I said—and meant it too—that I would  
    bear  
Whatever else might come; and all the past,  
Thou knowest full patiently I bore,—but oh!  
Not this! not this! O, tender, watchful care  
That's promised to Thy least of creatures, where  
Shall they whom Thou forsakest thenceforth go  
With their petitions? O Love! O Fatherhood,

In which I trusted! I call to Thee! I grope  
The dark that closes round me. Still must I hope  
That Thou art somewhere near—art still all-good,  
All-wise, all-kind.

Henceforth alone,—alone,  
Asking no aid, no light; I take my way  
Unguided thro' the night,—no longer *pray*,  
Since prayer can fail, and God forget His own!

A vast, bare, hopeless reach. Ah! shuddering soul,  
Must we two cross that pitiless expanse,  
Where foot hath never trod, nor eye explored,  
Nor voice disturbed its silence? Must we learn  
What felt the “Man of Sorrows,” desert-bound,  
Those forty fasting days? The “Man of Sorrows!”  
What man of other sort did ever walk  
A lifetime thro' on this forsaken earth?  
“He bore our griefs!” How helps it, since ourselves  
Their whole unmitigated, toilsome weight  
Must bear, with none to lighten? “He takes away  
The sins of the world. ‘Sins of the world.’”

How long

Alas! how long prayed we that He would take  
Sin from a single heart? Availed it aught?  
“If thou hast faith.” Ah had we not?—such faith  
As little lisping child's, that nightly craves  
Thy loving care at reverent mother's knee.

Poor superstition! Myth-born fantasy  
That lures the trusting soul and tempts away  
From Reason's well-springs? Vain, delusive dream  
That snares our hearts, and makes us cringing slaves  
While joy abideth, only to betray  
And leave us desolate of prop or guide  
When sorrow comes, or stress of suffering.

Farewell, false faith. Better the arid waste,  
With burning heat and thirst, since they be *real*,  
Than all thy fair, chimeric promises  
That ashes turn at touch of mortal needs.

So it doth seem, thou soul of mine, that we  
Can keep a certain life within us ev'n here,  
Where is no throb of life nor sign that aught  
Takes cognizance that we are still in being.

I had not thought that one could even be  
And God be not! Well, so much have we gained  
Of knowledge, thou and I, and nevermore  
Again need fear that aught can nihilate  
Pure consciousness, or rob us of each other.

What think'st thou, do the dead—the chilled in  
    blood  
And nerve and brain—the dead that do not walk—  
Do they lie thus? Does thought go on, and sight,  
And memory, keen and clear and absolute,  
Tho' irrelate, and all divorced from feeling?

Where then must go the throbs of passion? Where  
The fierce, unslaked ambitions? Whither flees  
The proud, imperious will when round a heart  
Death's icy finger circles?

'Tis a state  
Well worth attaining, this, methinks, where all  
The clear, gray sea of thought and reason lies  
Unrippled by the winds of will or wishing.

How many hundred æons since, my soul,  
Think'st thou we dreamed that God and Love were all  
Of Life? Poor feverish dream! 'Tis past, thank  
God!—

What's that? Thank *God*? Thank God? Why,  
God is not!  
God? God? O heart, be still! Wake not again  
To feel and torture me. Dost thou not know  
A heart should break but once and after that  
Forever-more be quiet? God? God?—that voice!—  
What! *thou*, my soul! That voice in *thee*! In  
THEE!—

Forgive! Forgive! I knew Thee not. I thought—  
What was't I thought?

And Thou hast never left me?  
Not e'en that time when no light was, nor hope  
Nor any touch of comfort? What? 'Twas *Thou*?—  
Thyself?—the dark, the pain, the blank despair?

O blind, that thought to know thy soul, nor knew  
The Christ that bideth in thee!

O blessed grief!

✓ O bliss of sorrowing that brought me thus  
In very truth to know Thee! Never more—  
Ah! never—never more depart Thou from me.  
✓ Keep Thou me near, nor let this heart again  
✓ Refuse to feel, or make some poor response  
✓ When Thy dear Master-hand shall deign to touch  
Its dormant strings and thrill them into music. ✓

For long I sat enwrapt in revery,  
The little book close-clasped in hands that throbbed  
And thrilled with sympathy, whose depths till now  
My heart nor guessed nor dreamed. The o'er-full past  
I lived again,—my own and Sœur Marie's;—  
For strangely blent in close coincidence  
Of trend and circumstance, our lives had seemed  
Like twin-born streams to take their prescient course  
Sure of the destined point of final meeting.

Dear, white-souled Sœur Marie! I knew her now,  
The brave, sweet, pure-aspiring "other self,"  
Whose image deep subconscious memory  
Had kept safe-guarded from my skeptic-veiled,  
Doubt-shrouded inner vision. Yet how had that  
So silent memory haunted! Disheartened oft,



With homesick longing had I turned away  
From one whose smile or accent stirred in me  
A moment's thrill of hope, to chide myself  
For foolish vague expectance. Still I harked  
Again and yet again for that dear voice,  
And waited for that smile that should betray  
The friend I yearned for—friend who should reflect  
Myself, but truer;—friend whose heart should hold,  
If not more love than mine, yet purer faith  
And larger charity; whose life should be  
My highest dreams of virtue realized;  
Whose spirit should infold my own and lend  
The needful strength and buoyancy, and large,  
Calm courage to inspire my energies  
To scale the heights of holiest aspiration.

Yet, tho' I waited thus, half-consciously,  
'Thro' all my earlier years: when Time at last  
Brought fuller answer to the unvoiced prayer  
Than my half-hearted faith had dared prevision,  
So grief-engrained was I, so doubt-involved  
And self-absorbed, the gift I coveted  
Had long been mine ere woke the recognition.  
But ah! I knew her now at last—*my friend*,  
Whose patient love, despite my slow response,  
Had won me from myself, had set me free  
From cold inertia's clutch and led me far  
Along the path to Wisdom. Yes, far on

And up that path must I unknowingly  
Have climbed; for lo! the valley where her love  
Had found me, stretched in dimness far below  
The sun-kissed summits of my blessed present.—  
Blessèd? even so, for revelation, sure  
And silent as the swiftly coming dawn  
Broke o'er my musing spirit. Like a voice  
From out the little book—soundless but clear—  
This message thrilled me: “O blind, that think'st to  
know

✓ Thy friend, thy better self, yet knowest not ✓  
‘Where two or three be gathered in my name,  
Together, there am I.’” A mighty wave  
Of light and understanding, thrilled with the ache  
Of Love ineffable, swept over me.  
I bowed my head upon the little book  
And all the frozen deeps within me melted;  
That well-known voice, my Sœur Marie, myself—  
Where had I dreamt this blessed dream before—  
On what Love-radiant star? A second's space  
I glimpsed that dear, adored familiar heaven,  
In banishment forgotten, yet enshrined  
Deep in the spirit's deathless memory.—  
I saw myself a dear, beloved child  
Whose place within that many-mansioned Home  
✓ Was mine from Time's beginning—must be mine  
Thro' all eternity. No other soul—✓

However accounted worthier than I—  
By any chance could fill. There must be  
A vacant place forever, well I knew,  
Till of my own volition I should choose  
To claim my priceless, waiting heritage.

Ah, the love! the love that so could cherish  
An erring, wayward, wilful-straying child  
Thro' cycles of indifference and forgetting!  
Where now the doubting heart, the wary, cold,  
Keen, skeptic reason? Where the bitterness  
That spurned the thought of wise Beneficence  
Behind the ruthless fate that worsted me  
And robbed me of my blindly worshipped idols.

A gentle step, a touch upon my hand,  
No need for speech; a meeting of the eyes  
And that was told that all the eloquence  
Of myriad tongues must still have left unuttered.

Together there, beneath the dear old pine,  
We stood and watched the sun sink slowly down  
Beyond the purple hills, and with it sank  
The old grief-wrecked, doubt-frighted, useless life  
Into oblivion's sea. And with the red,  
Gold harvest moon and tremulous evening star  
Uprose my soul, re-born and purified.

'Tis years ago, and still the fadeless light  
That dawned for me that far off blessed day

Shines on undimmed. With deep abiding peace  
I dwell among my chosen sisters, far  
From the world's troubled dream; and when the path  
Traced for my feet leads back among the sad,  
Sick hearts that know not of the blessed balm  
That healed my own, still trustfully I follow;—  
For well I know that work the Father's love  
Hath sent His angel Sorrow to prepare  
For those who seek to know and do His will:  
Nor is it asked of me in loneliness  
To sow the seed and patiently await  
Apart from human sympathy the harvest.  
For wheresoe'er His dear hand guideth me  
Not far away walks gentle Sœur Marie.

. . . . .  
. . . . .

Where'er Thou wilt: I follow.—'Tis enough  
That Thou hast walked this way. I will not seek  
To trace the path beyond the single step  
Before my feet. Tho' hard and steep, or drear  
And waste and desolate, I cannot fear.

Thy love surroundeth me. Lead Thou me on.

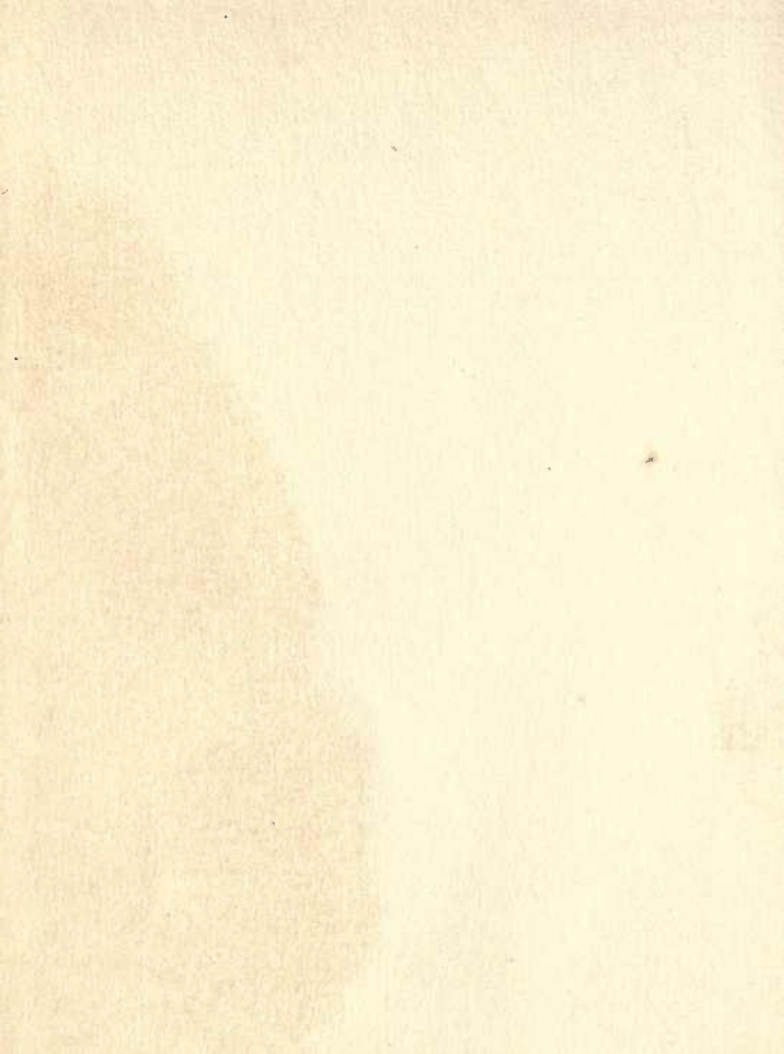
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